

THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL LABOUR:

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING
INDIAN FOLK PERFORMANCE

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Declaration of Authorship

I Brahma Prakash Singh hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

Performance has emerged as an important concept in the field of art, culture, media, communication and socio-anthropological studies. This thesis examines the ‘Indian folk performance’ from a performance studies perspective, examining performance as that which arises out of the labouring bodies and lived experiences in Indian society. Such performances are embedded in ‘everyday lives, struggles, and labour of different classes, castes, and gender’ (Rege 2002). These performances can be considered as performances of cultural labour. Performances of cultural labour are recognized by the centrality of performance, the materiality of labouring bodies, and the integration of various art forms.

Drawing on an understanding derived from the cultural performances of the Indian labouring lower-caste communities, the thesis attempts to provide a conceptual framework for understanding Indian folk culture and performances. For theoretical approaches, I have drawn from Dwight Conquergood’s idea of performance studies as a radical intervention (2002) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s concept of performance (2007) as well as interdisciplinary and integrated approaches to art and culture with a critical ethnography. Performance studies approach with a critical ethnography shows a great potential in such research because if performance stands for identity, then it also stands for the embodiment of oppressed identities, genres and struggles. While performance here functions as an epistemic as well as an analytical tool, critical ethnography provides an ‘ethical responsibility’ to address processes of hidden injustices (Madison 2005)

This thesis is based on an ethnographic study of four folk performances: *Bhūmipūjā* (a land worship celebration), contemporary *Bidesiyā* or *Laundā-nāc* (the theatre of migrant labourers), *Reśamā-Cuħarmala* (a Dalit ballad) from the North Indian state of Bihar, and the performances of *Gaddar* and *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* from the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Existing approaches to Indian theatre and performance studies, with some exceptions, no matter how admirable and ideologically progressive, continue to be shaped by residual strains of colonialism and caste-based feudal and elite cultures. This thesis attempts to go outside of such bourgeois understandings in terms of both its subject matter and approaches. I argue that the performance of cultural labour as a conceptual framework needs to go beyond the questions of representation and counter-discourse to take account of the articulation of the labouring body and its creative and productive processes that constitute the core of the performances of cultural labour.

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NOTES ON TRANSLATION, TRANSLITERATION, AND TRANSCRIPTION

From voluminous materials gathered from the fieldwork, I have transcribed and translated only those materials that I felt as the most relevant for this research project. Unless otherwise referenced all translations are my own except for the Telugu language. English translation of some songs already exists; yet to give the sense of poetics I have put a few original stanzas in the appendix. I have also provided an appendix for those original songs, which I have transcribed and translated. These songs are put in the order in which they are cited. In translation, I have attempted to unpack the flavours and rhythms rather than give literal and word-for-word translation.

Following Godwin Raheja and Ann Gold's method of transliteration used in *Listen to the Heron's World* (1994), I have tried to write down each sound as it was heard, and not to standardize spelling and grammar for the local dialects. For example, in standardized Hindi, the term *desī* should be written as *deśī* or *bidesiyā* as *videśiyā* but I have deliberately left them as *desī* and *bidesiyā* based on local pronunciation. Similarly, while drum is called *mānar* but the drummer becomes *manariyā* not *mānariyā*. Distinctive local pronunciations are used as it was heard—such as the standard Hindi syllable *nahin* (not) is pronounced as *na* in my village in Patna district of Bihar, *naī* just 2 km to its south, *nā* 5 km up north, *ne* 60 km in the west and *nāīn* beyond 15-20 km in the east. Many times actors from different regions come together for a performance and pronounce a word differently. In addition, these words are either shortened or stretched to provide rhythmical renditions. Writing in diacritical signs those songs that follow musical patterns in which words are stretched or shortened makes things more complex. I have tried my best to capture those pronunciations with their actual renderings. I have used a standard system for transliterating Bihari and Telugu words. The words are italicized and are given with diacritics wherever they occur. In this method, proper nouns are reproduced in roman type without diacritics, and they sometimes appear, as they are conventionally written, rather than as direct transliterations. While the play and performance titles are always italicized and written with diacritic marks (for example the story of *Reśama-Cuharamala*), Reshma and Chuharmal are reproduced in roman type. Some words are left un-italicized as they are already recognized in English vocabulary. I have transcribed audio-video files into text and have tried to fill some of the gaps with the notes I have undertaken during the fieldwork.

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE: PERFORMING CULTURAL LABOUR

1. Introduction

On November 2010, I reached Birpur village of the Vaishali district of Bihar (around 70 km from Patna town) at around 3 p.m. All the *Bidesiyā* (theatre of the migrant labourers) artists were taking a siesta. When they woke up, they were asked by the manager to freshen up and be back by 5:30 p.m. By 6 p.m., everyone was in the green room. Each had his own backpack. They took out the shaving kits and facials, as well as the wigs. The youngest of them was around twelve years old. The boy looked at his face in the mirror and applied make-up. While combing the fake hair (wigs), they were singing and getting ready. The environment of the green room was quite lively.

To announce the performance, *ustād* Padarth Rai, the director-manager of the group himself came onto the stage with the joker. They performed a comic interlude. The Joker had his hat on his head and the *ustād* had a stick in his hand; and the performance of cultural labour commenced:

PADARTH RAI [*to the joker*]: Are you a leader or an artist?

JOKER: Let me think! [*He looks at his dress*] No. I am not a leader; I

don't have a long *khādī* kurtā. I think I am an artist. [*By saying this, joker places himself as superior to political leaders*]

PADARTH RAI: Oh, so you are an artist. So, do you know any singing and dancing?

JOKER: Of course, I know! Otherwise how I can be an artist?

[*Singing and dancing are the minimum qualifications for an artist*]

PADARTH RAI: Can you sing something?

JOKER: What an idiot! If I am an artist, then I can definitely sing.

[*To the audience*] He asks me if I can sing. What a fool!

PADARTH RAI: Today we have come to Birpur (a village). People here think that I make a lot of money with this *nāc* (performance). But they do not understand that the artists have been always very fashionable. Whatever they earn, they spend on fun and fashion. They do not manage to send money to even their homes. This is why Bhikhari Thakur has upheld that if one is in a *nāc*, then one should not expect any money out of this. This is our story. [*He asks the joker to sing and the joker sings a song about the condition of the Bidesiyā artists: Sagro umar ham nācahun mein bitayālī* (The life I spent in dancing)]

JOKER: [*Takes a round, sings, and dances*]:

The life I spent in dancing.

So my father forced me

To get married to a girl

I got married, but I continued to dance

So my wife ran away with someone else

But I am not any less a fucker

So I also ran off with someone else's wife

But I continued to dance

My [new] wife bore a bastard kid

The fucking kid also died

But I continued to dance

PADARTH RAI: What else happened?

JOKER: I had two acres of paddy field

And an ancestral mud house

All have been washed away in the rains

But I continued to dance

PADARTH RAI: What happened then?

JOKER: [*laughs*] Even then, shamelessly, I am dancing [...] [1]

Sagro umar ham nācahun mein bitayālī (The life I spent in dancing) is more or less a realistic portrayal of the contemporary *Bidesiyā* artists. Most of the *Bidesiyā* artists are manual labourers who belong to the lower-caste-class sections of the Indian society. They are artists-performers as well as agricultural and contractual labourers who work in highly informal and unorganized sectors. They are the performers of the labouring class who are considered neither artists nor labourers. Unlike other forms of culture or labour, such cultural performances, which are widely prevalent, remain denigrated in the eyes of the elites and the feudal upper castes. Sharmila Rege (2002) has used the term ‘cultural labour’ to designate such popular cultural performances, which are embedded in the materiality of caste and labour and are constitutive of manual labour in Indian society. A significant number of cultural performances across India fall into this category. *Lavani* of Maharashtra, *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* of Tamilnadu, various *nāc* traditions and ritual performance traditions commonly labelled as the ‘Indian folk culture and performances’ are some of the most visible exemplars of the performance of cultural labour.

The performance of cultural labour is neither considered ‘culture’ (referring to elitist art and cultural practices) nor ‘labour’ (referring to explicit material production), and thus it becomes a category of disavowal. This disavowal, I argue, implies that the performance of cultural labour, in theatre, performance and cultural discourse, is considered too materialized (not immaterialized enough to become representative) and, in labour studies discourse is not materialized enough (thus remaining at the level of superstructural reflection). Besides generic category, the performance of cultural labour in

this thesis is a conceptual category that aims to conceptualise and theorise such cultural performances. In Indian *jati* (caste) and feudal mode of production, most of these cultural performances have their roots in the social and material conditions of the oppressed castes (Rege 2002). In fact, the relationship of the performance of cultural labour to manual labour and its embeddedness and proximity to materiality are the main reasons behind their overall denigration in the dominant cultural spheres. Daniel Miller rightly argues that the question of what morality is closely linked to the question of morality (2005).

In artistic and cultural practices, materiality is not limited to material culture or manual labour, but also to their social and creative processes of materialization. Thus, materiality is about the materiality of language and the language of materiality and the intercourse corresponding to these in culture and performance. This materiality is a product as well as a process of materialization through internalization. It is about the immediacies and experiencing of materials beyond representation and reflection. Materiality is also about the imagination of immateriality in a social and material context. It is true that art and performance make people realize their unknown but at the same time, art and performance in engagement with materiality also set the limits of creativity.

In the context of manual labour and cultural practices, Gramsci remarked that ‘if in any family a priest becomes a canon, immediately, for the entire clan ‘manual labour’ becomes a disgrace’ (Gramsci *Prison Writings* 284). Gramsci’s assertion, in fact, works both ways: it is not only when a priest becomes a canon that manual labour becomes a disgrace but the very foundation of the canon is based on its hostility to manual labour. This relationship between priesthood and manual labour is primarily maintained through cultural performances in most of the traditional, or, what I would better prefer to call the ‘contempraditional societies.’¹

¹ The boundary between traditional and contemporary in the popular performances of cultural labour are getting fused, therefore, it needs a new conceptualization. My use of ‘contempraditional’ denotes breaking of that boundary between traditional and contemporary.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring the relationship between cultural performance and labour that produces a peculiar mode of art and culture, which I shall refer to as ‘cultural labour.’ Because of its engagement with manual labour, labouring bodies become the centre of this kind of performance. Adding to this, the performance of cultural labour is the performance of the lived experience of the labouring communities in which the mode of expression is primarily based on ‘the essential unbreakable relation between the subject who experiences and the context and content of experience’ (Guru & Sarukkai 36). Using Guru and Sarukkai’s argument, I argue that the performance of cultural labour as a mode of articulation of lived experience is not about freedom of expression but about the lack of freedom of expression (36). I use the performance of cultural labour in two ways: as a conceptual framework based on cultural labour and as a subject of study, which embodies cultural labour in its practices. Broadly, this thesis seeks to examine the politics and aesthetics of the performances of cultural labour with emphasis on labouring bodies in performance through the interdisciplinary approach of performance studies, supplemented by cultural materialism and critical ethnography.

A performance studies approach embraces ‘performance as a paradigm for understanding how culture makes and remakes itself’ by exemplifying that performances are constitutive of culture (Bell 116). In my analysis, performance emerges not only as a social, political, and aesthetic category but also as a unifying category, which combines all of them and at the same allows for differences within their performance. However, performance is more than the combination of all these categories; as a flow of creative force, it has capacity to surpass them all. It can create a new category and can dissolve the existing one. Nevertheless, the capacity of performance also depends on the condition of performativity. For example, in the performance of cultural labour, a body is not constructed through an abstract sense of performance but through its labour. Considering Eileen Boris’ argument that ‘the body becomes constructed through its labour,’ and every

labour produces its own rhythm, one can also argue that the performances of cultural labour are constructed through labouring bodies in performance (11). Though the politics and performative meaning of such performances are not necessarily representative of labour, they are essentially shaped by the corporealities of labouring bodies. Therefore, there is an inherent danger in studying such performances merely from their representational aspects. For these reasons, in my analysis, I have tried to go beyond the theatre and cultural studies approach, which reduces such constructions to a mere ‘examination of representation’ (Rege 1040).

Thinking through the theatricality and performativity of the labouring bodies, in this thesis, I attempt to provide a conceptual framework to study the diverse traditions of performance in India commonly known as ‘folk culture and performances’. I use the term folk performance with the similar reservations expressed by de Bruin in her work on *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* of Tamil Nadu to indicate that such performances are ‘performed and supported by members of lower and middle caste village audiences, who share the same social and ritual background (*Kaṭṭaikkūttu* 5).² This study is based on the analysis of four folk performance genres ranging from ritual to theatrical performance. The attempt is to map out this broader field by considering some of the major characteristics and contradictions of these performances. The performances examined include *Bhūmi-pūjā* (a land worship celebration), a shamanic-ritualistic performance; *Bidesiyā* or *Launḍā-nāc*, a theatrical performance by migrant labourers; the performance of *Reśamā-Cuharamala*, a story performed in different genres by the Dalit- *Dusādh* community from north India; and the performance of Gaddar and *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* from Andhra Pradesh.

I shall begin by defining cultural labour. I take culture as, what Raymond Williams says, ‘the constitutive human process’ and cultural as ‘the whole systems of

² I agree with de Bruin that folk refers to ‘the ways of operating’—lacking a formal institutionalization and a formal codification (*Kaṭṭaikkūttu* 5). The performances that I have taken up in my study cannot be confined strictly to drama and theatre; therefore, the term performance is used instead of drama and theatre.

significations' (1989). For the definition of labour, I take Karl Marx's early use of labour, which refers to all forms of human doing, not necessarily directed, to economical outcome or material production (*Grundrisse* 1973). Thus, cultural labour is a kind of labour that is not always directed towards economic outcome or material production but towards the systems of significations that articulate the constitutive human process through performance. The performance of cultural labour signifies the artistic and cultural activities embedded in labour and the labouring activities having artistic, creative and aesthetic functions. Unlike other forms of labour, cultural labour in Indian 'contempraditional' society (basically, contemporary traditional society) remains unrecognized and low.³ Rege (2002) points out that in the absence of concerns about labour in the cultural studies discourse, popular caste-based performances, which are embedded in labour, do not get attention and become a category of denial. Despite her radical approach, Rege did not give much attention to the artistic and aesthetic factors embedded in such performances. These artistic and aesthetic factors are important because the people involved in these performances are not just cultural labourers but also artists. In other words, their cultural production also involves creative and aesthetic dimensions besides the usual labour process. The conditions of low status of such performances are also related to aesthetic factors: 'lack of codification and a systematic training of its performers' and inherent 'flexibility' in its aesthetic form (de Bruin *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* 13).

In feudal and capitalist modes of production, 'art (or culture) itself becomes a commodity and the relations of artistic production reduce the position of the artist to one of an exploited labourer, producing surplus value' (Bottomore 6). Actually, surplus value is quite evident in cultural performances such as in the *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* performance of Tamil

³ The boundary between traditional and contemporary in the popular performances of cultural labour is quite flexible, therefore, it needs a new conceptualization. My use of 'contempraditional' denotes breaking of that boundary between traditional and contemporary.

Nadu, *Lāvāṇī* of Maharashtra or in the traditions of *nācñī* (dancing girls) across India. Acknowledging the political economy of such performances, which are very much a part of the lived experiences of the performers, I would argue that such performances could not simply be considered under the complete ‘hegemony’ of the dominant culture. They simultaneously contain subversive language with radical potentialities. In addition, even by virtue of their aesthetic qualities, such performances have the potential to subvert the dominant prevailing relationship.

Unlike the performance of ‘immaterial labour,’ the performance of ‘cultural labour’ is not a new phenomenon.⁴ In fact, the performance of cultural labour is a continuation as well as a product of the representational crisis, which has emerged and continues to sustain in the postcolonial and global capitalist society. In the course of my study of Indian folk performances, the performance of cultural labour has emerged as a conceptual framework to analyse the politics and aesthetics of the heterogeneous traditions of cultural performances subsumed under the broader category of ‘local,’ ‘regional,’ ‘folk’ and ‘living traditions of performance.’ These performances stand for a diverse range of performance traditions starting from theatrical performances to storytelling, ballads, music, song, dance, rituals, riddles, legends, acrobatics and festivals. With the amalgamation of various arts—songs, dances, music, dialogue and acting—the performance becomes a ‘self-contained and complete entertainment for the audience’ (Mathur 3). The performance traditions are strongly rooted in oral and non-Brahminical culture and religious practices. They are live, embodied, experiential, interactive, multi-medial events in a multiple rural context (de Bruin ‘Lecture’ 2012). They involve ‘visual representations like facial expressions, mimicry, gestures and other histrionic effects that made them more than mere oral utterances’ (Srampickal 57). Though several terms are

⁴ Immaterial labour is defined as ‘the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato 132). Hardt and Negri define ‘immaterial labour’ as a labour ‘that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an [*affective*] emotional response’ (110).

used for such inter-generic performances, for example, folk literature, folklore, folk culture, regional culture, oral tradition, local culture and rural culture, none of them seem to capture their generality. Considering ‘flexibility,’ it would be difficult to comprehend these performances under a single nomenclature (de Bruin ‘Lecture’ 2012). Gramsci’s observation on folklore suggests that such performances ‘should be studied as a ‘conception of world and life’’ (*rather than in its nomenclature*). This conception of folk, as Gramsci puts it, is ‘implicit to a large extent in determinate strata of society and in opposition to the ‘official’ conception of the world’ (Forgacs 361). The cultural labour as a conceptual framework is not only a conceptual category, but also stands for the subjective category and carries the historical determinants of a culture against the official celebration of ahistorical categories of ‘folk’, ‘local’ and ‘regional.’

This thesis—*the Performance of Cultural Labour*—seeks to explore the cultural performances embedded in manual labour and lived experience, which are integral to the Indian underprivileged, labouring communities. I define the performance of cultural labour as the artistic and creative practices core to the politics and aesthetics of popular performance traditions of the oppressed communities in India. Unlike the Marxist notion of creative labour, which is exemplified by the ‘non-alienated condition of labour’, in cultural labour, even the artistic and creative labour becomes alienated (Bottomore 6). Moreover, although art, in general, enjoys a privileged status in a bourgeois society, the art of cultural labour, in particular, is not only looked down upon but also not recognized. The fact today is that cultural labour is neither considered ‘cultured’ (as in ‘civilized’) enough to be studied under cultural studies nor theatrical enough to be defined under the normative language of theatre and performance studies; and perhaps not laboured enough to be studied by the scholars of labour studies. On the one hand, this liminality of the performance of cultural labour makes it an imperative subject to be studied under performance studies. On the other hand, ‘the constitutive liminality of performance

studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledge' ('Performance Studies' 151).⁵ Within the purview of performance studies, the performance of cultural labour offers a conceptual framework that works horizontally across regions, from *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* in Tamil Nadu to *Bidesiyā* in Bihar.

I propose that cultural labour can work as an experiential and self-explanatory category for a radical analysis of popular Indian folk performances. Rege has already indicated the importance of the study of cultural labour in her study of the popular culture in Maharashtra. Rege defines cultural labour (in Indian society) 'as those forms and practices which have roots in the social and material conditions of the Dalits and *Bahujans* [*the Other Backward Classes (OBCs)*]' (1040). Though the performances of cultural labour are open to all castes, the ritual service castes in particular have been prominent in such performances. Although these are the caste groups that are commonly engaged in manual labour and physical work in Indian society, the broader spectrum of performance of cultural labour cannot be restricted to caste-based performances alone.⁶ A significant section of Indian Adivasis and nomadic communities also perform cultural labour. However, in this thesis, my focus is on the performances of cultural labour in the socio-political context of the Indian labouring lower-caste communities.

Taking cognizance of the feminist critiques that revealed the unrecognized labour aspects of reproduction and housework (Federici 1975; Dalla Caste 1999), I would like to point towards a parallel between a woman's and a performer's cultural labour, which are both ignored or disregarded. Thus, my concern here is to reveal the factors of labour and creativity in the performance of cultural labour. In the context of cultural labour, it is equally important to recognize and conceptualize the artistic and creative factors. This is

⁵ Liminality has been one of the major key words in performance studies. Performance studies scholars have come to consistently define their object and their own research in terms of liminality: as a mode of embodied activity that transgresses, resists or challenges social structures (McKenzie 'Genre Trouble').

⁶ See Jan Breman's (2007) study on Labour Bondage in west India (2007); Gyan Prakash's (1999) and A. Chakravarti's (2001) studies on agricultural labourers in Bihar; D. Chakravarty on Bengal (2000); and ER Leach's (1971) and D. Washbrook's (1993) studies on south India.

because folk performers cannot be reduced to their identity as labourers; they also need their recognition as performers and artists. However, for such performers who have a real desire to perform, cultural labour also becomes what Giulia Palladani describes as ‘foreplay’—the desire, the pleasure—that drives the performer to pursue the activity without compensation (96). This is also one of the reasons that their labour is not recognized and generally viewed as desire similar to the labour of sex-workers. In addition, cultural labour may not be considered as labour because it does not produce anything material in a productivist sense. It seems that the seriousness of labour gets lost in the ‘non-seriousness’ of the fun, entertainment and leisure of play.

However, in order to recognize the labour dimension of such performances, we need a theoretical basis to substantiate the claim of labour. For instance, what performers do and how they contribute to labour needs a theoretical explanation. Although, in a way, one can say that the performers of cultural labour are just like other labourers because they perform a certain work. Yet not every sort of work can be defined as labour; neither can all labour be categorized as work. In this regard, Locke’s famous statement, ‘the labour of our body and the work of our hands,’ clarifies this difference by putting emphasis on the bodily engagement. For example, labour was supposed to be done by slaves in the Greek society (Arendt 1958).⁷ In this context, performers cannot be called labourers because they simply perform. Nevertheless, performers are labourers because they perform through the body and by performing, they transform time, space and character (an actor as a labourer). However, this proposition is not enough to identify the labouring bodies in performance and differentiates it with other kinds of work/labour. The performance of cultural labour rather needs a full involvement of the body. In fact, the body becomes an object and a site on which the subject (performer) works. In the

⁷Arendt argues that the institution of slavery in antiquity was not a device for cheap labour or an instrument of exploitation for profit; rather it was an attempt to exclude labour from the conditions of man’s life (84). Even in this case of the performance of cultural labour, labour as an impure activity needs to be avoided.

performance of cultural labour, the physical body becomes the key source and site for both the performer and the observer. Labour here is embodied and objectified through what Marx calls ‘primary appropriation’: reflected by the change in form of space, character, state, or body (Bottomore 437). Thus, the performances may appear immaterial, but they may embody the materiality of labour through their corporealities.

Most importantly, the labouring body becomes the major source of all purposes in such performances, especially for communities who are engaged in manual labour. Nevertheless, bodily enactments of these communities are ‘enabled not only by their flesh and bones, but also by social, cultural and environmental and political contexts that become intricately into what the body is and what is it able to be and do’ (Waite 412). The phrase ‘what the labouring body is and what is it able to be and do’ determines the fundamentals of the politics and aesthetics of the performance of cultural labour. This becomes more evident from A.N. Perumal’s remarks:

Throughout the night, they shouted and hooted in the name of singing and hopped and leaped instead of acting. In the morning, they went from door to door with stretched out arms to get something to fill their belly. Their action on stage and their behaviour in the streets were nothing but a great disgrace to the noble art. Respectable people looked at them with utter contempt. Something substantial had to be done to restore the stage from the hands of these ugly street dancers [*sic*]. (138)

The labouring body is the core to the politics and aesthetics of cultural labour. The politics and aesthetics can only be realized *in* and *through* performance, particularly through the performance of labouring bodies. The performance here works both as a mode of action, expression and articulation and as a critical lens for looking at those performative meanings, actions and expressions.

Rege outlines five major reasons for the marginalization of popular performances based on cultural labour in contemporary cultural discourses. First, most of the cultural studies discourses draw their framework from European and American popular culture, understood largely as mass mediated cultures, and the negotiations involved in the new forms of cultural consumption. Second, as Rege argues and which equally applies to the field of culture and performance, it is marked by a decreasing concern with issues of the political economy of production, dissemination, consumption and an unprecedented concern with the fragmentation of cultures and identities (1038). She says that by 1980, subversion had been replaced by subversive pleasure. One of the main aims of this thesis is to explore the reasons behind this marginalization of cultural labour and it will do so by juxtaposing the performance of cultural labour with ‘the broader field of power’ (Bourdieu *Field of Cultural Production*). I shall be unpacking ‘the structure of objective relations’ and ‘the structures of feeling’ embedded in such performances to expose the strategies of distinction that shape aesthetic taste and performance.⁸ Scholars (Bourdieu 1993; Williams 1977) have already argued that culture is not just artistic production and ideas but a way of life embedded in experiences and actual practices. And, as a part of social production, cultural labour presents the fundamental qualitative and dynamic development of evolutionary human resources (Williams *Problems in Materialism* 55). Not surprisingly, culture and social class strongly correlate in the form of cultural labour. Bourdieu’s (1984) claim that cultural practices are markers of underlying class distinctions (however, the former is not merely an epiphenomenon of the latter) makes strong sense in such cultural practices.

Just as the early class based analysis has neglected the role of culture, so has contemporary cultural scholarship undermined the role of class and labour and thus, the culture associated with labour, especially with manual labour. Despite the body being the

⁸ Raymond Williams (1977) has used the term ‘the structures of feeling’ as a methodological tool to analyse cultural change in three categories: *dominant, residual and emergent*.

centre of discourse in theatre, performance and cultural studies, the labouring body has been one of the most neglected subjects of research. Eagleton sarcastically puts it:

Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring ones. (Eagleton 2)

In addition, while the body has its own creative dimension in the postmodernist discourse of desire and creative celebration, what is ‘strategically ignored is the labour dimension essential to creative production’ (Pang 2009). This has happened precisely because of ‘the laissez-faire approach to class’ (Murphy 49).

In fact, more than neglecting these important relationships between performance and labour or between culture and productive work, there are scholars who celebrate this separation of performance [*basically leisure*] activity from productive work as the most interesting and unifying factor of play, games, sports, theatre and ritual, for example, Schechner’s idea of performance (*Performance Theory* 11). In fact, culturalists and theatre anthropologists have paid little attention to the materiality of the body, which is not merely about discourse and pre-expressivity but also about the very matter—the body and its substance—the physicality and labour. Unlike Eugenio Barba and Nicola Saverese’ idea of universal body technique, I argue that we need to situate ‘the universal body’ in the actual practices of culture and labour so as to recognize the dynamics of language and aesthetics, which a body produces, without ignoring historicity.

On the other side, even if some of the performance activities (e.g., leisure) are separated from ‘actual labour’, in their separation they produce alienation, which is a product of labour. In other words, labour has incorporated itself with its subject: while the former is materialised, the latter is transformed (Sayers 2007). This corporeality is central to the performance of cultural labour. Corporeality here stands for ‘bodily reality, not as

natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience’ (Foster et al. xi). Popular caste-based performances are the best examples of such corporeality, where physicality is embedded in the cultural experiences of caste and manual labour activities. Corporeality is full of aesthetic and creative dimensions, which are either reduced to the domain of social praxis or denigrated along with popular culture as entertainment without art. Susan L. Foster and others have observed that ‘bodies always gesture towards other fields of meaning, but at the same time instantiate both physical mobility and articulability’ (xi). As they argue:

Bodies do not only pass meaning along, in their uniquely responsive way. They develop choreographies of signs through which they discourse: they run (or lurch, or bound, or feint, or meander...) from premise to conclusion; they turn (or pivot, or twist...) through the process of reasoning; they confer with (or rub up against, or bump into...) one another in narrating their physical fate. (Foster et al. xi)

The physicality is important here for two main reasons: corporeality and theatricality (for its representational quality). Both are significant in the study of Indian folk performances. Performance emanates from labouring bodies and gets materialised in its social and material context; thus, materiality becomes a vital theoretical enquiry because of its role in shaping and influencing the agency of the performers. Materiality in the performance of cultural labour is about the materialisation of performance in all possible ways, for example, through contextualization—manipulation of the contents of a play to suit a particular context and through localization—the adaptation of the plot and other elements of the story to the local culture (de Bruin *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* 282). Thus, performance strategy becomes a basic criterion for materialisation.

Judith Butler defines the materiality of a body arising in the matrix of power relations such that the agency of the subject comes after and not prior to the materiality of the body emerging through a process of enactment (Butler 1999). In the context of labouring bodies, the process of enactment incorporates not only the material body but also the materiality of the allied objects, for instance, that of broomsticks, leather or mud that might be used by the performers. The constituents of material objects and the materiality of labouring bodies play an important role in the construction of the stigmatized body in its performance. Here, the broomsticks and mud represent the nature of enactment, which in turn determines the nature of performance and the social identity of performers. Materiality is so direct and naturalized that it seems to disappear from the eyes of cultural analysts. In the caste system, the social identity of performers also constructs the agency of the social actor (the subject). This is because the agency is not always acquired; it is sometimes both given and imposed (by birth here). In addition, since a similar set of performances are denigrated across cultures, there is also evidence that this denigration is not only limited to the legacies of discourses—discipline, surveillance and knowledge produced through language but, most significantly, by the historically specific materials (Pollock 2003).

I propose that the performance of cultural labour needs to be explored and conceptualized in terms of a broader understanding of cultural materialism. By using a cultural materialist approach, the goal is to articulate and apply a method for achieving a precise and fully contextualized and politicized understanding of performance (Knowles 9). Materialism here insists ‘that culture does not transcend the material forces and relations of production’ (Dollimore and Sinfield qtd. in Knowles 12). Williams defines cultural materialism as a theory of culture as a [social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of ‘arts’, as social uses of material means of production (What Marx says, language as ‘material practical consciousness’) (1980: 243). This cultural

materialist approach also becomes important because these cultural performances are not only about the labour process but also about creative process. In this regard, Williams has considered art as both a creative and social process unlike most of the social science studies, which tend to reduce artistic and cultural performances to a mere ‘social.’ I will expand on Marx’s assertion that ‘the real relation between culture and society or between art and labour, have always been to be seen in terms of the particular mode of production and social order within which the relations practically occur’[sic] (Williams 2007: 15). Several performance genres of cultural labour are strongly endowed in the political economy of a village society. Gloria Goodwin Raheja’s (1988) and Gyan Prakash’s (1996) studies show the role of *dāna* (ritual gift) in reinforcing a hierarchy on the lower-caste section of a society in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Production of this popular culture is inextricably linked to the mode of consumption. Thus, the performance of cultural labour is characterised by the class of a society that watches and patronises it. On the other side, the performance of cultural labour as an artistic practice cannot be simply reduced to ‘social engineering’ (‘ideology’) or ‘superstructural reflection’ (Williams *Marxism* 151).

In this particular study, the performance of cultural labour as a conceptual term functions as a thread—a set of connecting ideas and structures, which combine popular Indian folk performances of the lower-castes, small peasants, landless and migrants.

Against generalisations, this thesis is an attempt to provide a micro-level analysis. In macro-level studies, culture is generalized and its rich particularities are ignored. As Samik Bandyopadhyay has strongly underlined it:

Performance studies in India have come to a stage where there is a need to make more micro-level studies of artistic-performers, forms, movements, techniques, practices and traditions in their local-regional-cultural contexts. Macro-level generalizations have too often erased those rich particularities that actually create the

meaning that is shared by the performers and his/her community
(Bandyopadhyay qtd. in Dutt and Munshi 'Foreword' x).

I believe that in the study of art and culture the analysis should be 'rooted in the particularities of daily experience' (Thiong'o *Moving the Centre* 25). Nevertheless, I am also well aware that in the postmodernist turn of culture and performance studies, there is a growing tendency to essentialize particularities and celebrate fragmentations and incompleteness. This trend can undermine linkages and interconnections and ultimately, mask the real differences, which are indeed at the foundations of cultural labour. As Thiong'o puts it, 'local knowledge is not an island unto itself; it is part of the main, part of the sea. Its limits lie in the boundless universality of our creative potentiality as human beings' (*Moving the Centre* 29). Thus, in this thesis, while Indian folk performance can be seen as deriving from local-regional-cultural contexts, the performance of cultural labour as a conceptual framework finds its broader macro intra-regional connections.

I have quite deliberately chosen popular folk performances of the labouring lower-caste communities, which explicitly illustrate the performativity and aesthetics of labouring bodies. They are primarily the performances of two major lower-caste sections: Dalits (the untouchables; officially, the Scheduled Castes) and *Śūdras*, the category of Backward Castes or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) also known as *Bahujans*, who are mainly involved in manual labour. Despite being popular traditions, the performance of cultural labour has remained marginalized in the absence of social and cultural capital, which legitimises a cultural practice. Most of the scholars attribute this problem of marginalization of such performances to the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. In the context of England, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe how the ideological distinction between embodiment and rationality was the result of a deliberate bourgeois political strategy in which the bourgeois created a public sphere 'without smells, without coarse laughter, without organs' (93-94). Scholars like Charu Gupta (2002), Francesca

Orsini (2002) and Vasudha Dalmia (2006) have highlighted this nationalist middle-class bourgeois politics in the context of obscenity, sexuality, and linguistic representation in north India. Though these studies make some crucial departures in the postcolonial scholarship, they are limited to the public sphere and are mainly based on textual sources and archival documents. There is no doubt that these writings presented a counter-discourse, which was a necessary step in dismantling the existing hegemony. However, I would like to extend the counter-discourse to alternate spheres and materials that should provide a radical intervention beyond the counter-discourse and counter-narrative. In this sense, the performance of cultural labour not only gives a critique of the culturalist turn in academics where the labour category is completely absent but also reclaims the labouring bodies and their artistic factors into consideration. In the absence of texts and written documents, the performance of cultural labour can only be reconfigured through alternate sources of the body and its movements.

In this analysis of the performances of cultural labour, I would like to go beyond the politics and aesthetics of representation, which I think denotes a much deeper malaise than is usually conceded in formations of the aesthetic taste of the nationalist bourgeois. In the bourgeois discourse, theatre and performance have been reduced to means of communication and techniques of representation. Following Williams, I argue that folk performance as cultural labour, both as produced and as means of production, is directly subjected to historical development (*Problems in Materialism* 50). In this regard, G. Aloysius has argued that the radical positioning of this historicity needs ‘a longer history, more unified than it appears on the surface and is structural rather than merely peripheral’ (7). I argue that even before the advent of the bourgeois in Indian society, the division of purity/pollution and mental/manual labour marked this cultural body. Nevertheless, colonial intervention instead of breaking that process further concretized it. For this reason, the archaeology of performance becomes equally important along with its

historiography. I contend that the liberal argument that the profession of performance has always been denigrated, because of its subversive language, is much generalised. There have always been performers who have been celebrated and those who have been denigrated. Scholars like de Bruin (1999) and Claire Pamment (2012) have argued that the performance of cultural labour is denigrated, while the performance of upper-class sections is celebrated in the public sphere. This thesis attempts to move beyond ‘the respectability and representation discourse’ of the middle-class, to take into account the questions of artistic and labour factors in theatre and performance studies (L. Singh 270).

In conjunction with gender and caste-based discrimination, prejudices against manual labour are deeply entrenched in Indian society. Manual labour is not only regarded as unskilled but is also considered profane, untouchable and too much mixed. The same prejudices are also extended to the art and culture produced by manual labourers, generating an aesthetic of disgust for a dominant section of society. Folk performance, like manual labour, is also considered lacking in skill in comparison to the so-called ‘higher art.’ Caste, gender and labour become the most visible socio-political categories to discuss the performance of cultural labour. All three categories are reflected in traditionally loose conceptions of artistic genres such as *jānton ke gīt* (songs of stone-grinder), *jāton ke gīt* (caste-based songs) and *janāni ke gīt* (songs of women) as part of the mnemonic cultures of the community, constructed in a particular social experience.⁹ Within the ghettoised society of India—where community, history and memory are defined in terms of social hierarchies—*jāti* (caste) becomes the most important defining characteristic. In fact, the caste based *Jajmānī* system is the basis of a performance genealogy of cultural labour. The *Jajmānī* system refers to the economic, political, social, religious and cultural interaction based on the caste system between different castes.

⁹ The songs sung exclusively by women can include those about labour and caste also.

Most importantly, caste system as an institution pervades almost all aspects of life. It also plays a vital role in the politics of knowledge that ‘nurtured and normalized it from the dim and distant past to the present time’ (Ambedkar *Vol.7* 239). Ambedkar, the most prominent of Dalit intellectuals, defines the caste system as a system of graded inequality:

[...] there is no such class as a completely unprivileged class except the one, which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the [*caste*] system. (Ambedkar *Vol.5* 101-102)

Brahmanism, the philosophical basis of the caste system was supposed to disappear with the modernization and secularisation of the modern nation state, but it continues to hold sway in all spheres of contemporary collective life (Aloysius 40). While Brahmanism as a culture has remained inscribed on lower-caste labouring bodies ‘Brahmanical as polity has emerged as the postcolonial predicament of Indian state’ (40). This body politic in turn provides social and cultural capital to the class that in turn denigrates cultural labour.

In caste-based genealogies of performance, like in other such mnemonic cultures, performance becomes a historical transmission and a ‘dissemination of cultural practices through collective representation’ (Roach *Cities of the Dead* 25). Roach explains:

Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silence between them) and imaginary movements dreamed in

minds, [...] a psychic rehearsal for physical actions drawn from a repertoire that culture provides. (26)

This repertoire of mnemonic cultures is the repertoire of what Pierre Nora calls ‘true memory’, which is performed ‘in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken tradition, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories’(Nora qtd. in Roach *Cities* 26). Nora differentiates between ‘places of memory’— the artificial sites of the modern production of national and ethnic memory and ‘environments of memory’— the largely oral and corporeal retentions of traditional cultures (qtd. in Roach *Cities* 26).

I propose that while ‘places of memory’ are both construed by and reciprocally construe ‘imagined communities’, the ‘environments of memory’ represent the memory of what I call the imagination of the ‘experienced communities’. While the experienced communities are not necessarily those oppressed communities that bear the brunt of oppression directly, their memories and histories are suffused with that brunt. This is because historical experiences do not suddenly disappear with a cultural bonfire—the multicultural celebrations of the oppressor and the oppressed—but rather endure in the ‘echoes of the bone’, which come with every small crack. These mnemonic experiences are imprinted everywhere for that ‘experienced communities’, not necessarily in the scripts but also on dead animals, on their skin and bones (in the caste system), which at times work like the oracle’s bone and narrate stories from the past.

The performance of cultural labour does not necessarily evoke labour in its representation, but certainly involves labouring bodies in its performance. Therefore, in the study of cultural labour, it becomes imperative to understand its performance beyond ‘representation’ and ‘event’. In this case, ‘who are performing for whom’ (experiential category) becomes more important than ‘what one performs’ (representation category). This does not mean that ‘what one performs’ is not important in the performance of

cultural labour, but the analysis of cultural labour on the basis of only ‘what one performs’ can lead to a reduction and mis-interpretation. In addition, the theatrical economy of the creative body also becomes important in order to understand the political economy of cultural labour, which tends to be more suggestive than realistic.

Undoubtedly, the performance of cultural labour is very much a part of the power relationship of the social forces. Nonetheless, ‘by virtue of its aesthetic form,’ it has radical potential to subvert and overthrow ‘the dominant consciousnesses’ based on that power (Marcuse 1978). Cultural labour in performance creates an artistic realm in which ‘the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible’ (Marcuse 6). Since ‘cultural labour’, according to Rege, is a reflection of the ‘everyday lives, struggles and labour of different classes, castes and gender’, their ‘struggles over cultural meanings are inseparable from [*their*] struggles for survival’ (2002). Concurrently, performance enables people to negotiate their way through the various realms of being; it gives them ‘enabling capacity’ to look at things differently (Thiong’o ‘Interview’ Cantalupo).

According to Balwant Gargi, folk theatre represents the people in their natural habitat, with all their contradictions and multifarious activities (6). Indian folk performance is not a homogenous category; the hierarchies within the folk society, therefore, also need to be recognized. For instance, in the performance of cultural labour, the tension between the feminine *Lāvanī* and the masculine *Powādā*, despite both being Dalit performances, becomes self-evident in their performance. On the contested sites of village and peripheral society, the performance becomes what James Scott would call ‘a struggle over the appropriation of symbols’ (*Weapons of the Weak* xvii). For all these reasons, unlike the homogenous notion of folk, the performances of cultural labour are full of contradictions; they are extremely heterogeneous. This thesis attempts to unpack those heterogeneities through those contradictions. Often, the embedded contradictions themselves generate performances. This may include contradictions between tradition and

modernization, public scripts and hidden scripts, grotesque and beautified images, or the various characters on stage. For all these reasons, the performance of cultural labour is neither a ‘pre-political’ act nor is it, what I would like to call a ‘pure-political’ act. It rather functions as performance strategy, where the political and creative factors are employed as a mechanism for survival. The performance of cultural labour at times reinforces hierarchies and at times imagines resistance. Rege has explained this:

[*These caste based popular practices*] are neither just traditions of resistance nor just forms on which the bourgeois forms are super-imposed. They are at once emancipatory and imprisoning, containing and resisting and relatively more or less affected and unaffected (in different spheres) by capital [...] The category of popular persists but the ways in which it relates to everyday lives, struggles and labours of different castes, classes and gender, alters the content of the category. (1040)

More specifically, I will be analysing the performance of cultural labour by examining four of its major features in relation to the four performances. These features include the landscape of the performance of cultural labour in the performance of *Bhūmī-pūjā*, the materiality of the performance of cultural labour in *Bidesiyā*, the performance of genre and identity in *Reśma-Cuharmal* and the performance of labouring bodies in the political performance of Gaddar and *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī*.

These performances are widely viewed and studied as folk theatre, folk culture and folk performances. Acknowledging that the term ‘folk’ is a problematic category that has its own biases, I use ‘Indian folk performance’ to understand the popular perceptions and scholarly (mis)interpretations of, what I say, the performance of cultural labour. In the next few sections, this very problematic of the ‘folk’ will be my central concern.

2. Literary Anthropology of the Indian Folk Performance

The Problems of Naming

Ālha, also known as *Ālha-Khaṇḍ* (The Lay of *Ālha*), is one of the most popular ballads sung by the lower-castes across the Hindi speaking regions in north India.¹⁰ *Ālha-Khaṇḍ* is sung as a ballad, told as a legend, performed in local theatrical styles and used as proverb in their day-to-day lives. In scholarly language, the performance genre is considered as ballad, legend, story, theatre, folk song, folklore and much more. Scholars have used different names for such performances in line with their own preferences and framework. However, as we know, naming is not value-free. Naming also entails power dimensions, what Bourdieu calls ‘the symbolic strategies through which agents aim to impose their visions of the division of the social world’ (*Language* 239). This problem of naming leads to the first problem in conceptualization of Indian folk performance and is connected to the conceptual framework because, as Hansen argues, naming comes with ‘its own framework’ (*Grounds for Play* 35).

According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, ‘folk’ as an adjective expresses ‘something about the lives and feelings of ordinary people in a particular group or country, especially those living in the countryside.’ However, what constitutes ‘something’? We have indeed a wide range that qualifies: from European folklore to America’s oral traditions and from the German *Volk* to the Indian *loka*. There is no doubt that the existing terms have some commonality and linkages with each other, but what about the gaps which exist in between: for example, between folk-life and folklore or literary-folk and anthropological-folk. The challenge is how to study a field, which is full of gaps. A performance studies scholar might profess that this is the gap where performance appears, while others could say that perhaps this is the gap where a

¹⁰*Ālhā* and Udal were two legendary warrior brothers who fought many battles. The ballad, *Ālhā-Khand* is believed to be written by Jagnik, a court poet of King Parmal. In 1836, due to the popularity of this ballad, William Waterfield translated it into English, under the title of *The Lay of Ālhā*.

marginalized culture and performance disappears. For some, 'Performance's being becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan qtd. by Taylor *The Archive* 5). In that case, in every condition, the gap becomes the rejoinder to the etymology of folk performance. These ontological, metaphorical and real existing gaps represent not just diversities and differences. They also represent 'the inequities of cultural hegemony' (S. Chatterjee 'Sombhu Mitra' 8) and the inequalities of social classes. Due to its encompassing characteristics, Indian folk performance remains largely undefined. Rather, it can be said that it resists such definition. I take this 'un-definability' as the perfect recipe for performance studies. The un-definability is concomitant to what performance studies scholars find re-assuring (Taylor 'Profession').

Let me call such a performance 'X'. No, this is not mathematics. This is rather performance studies. Let us then call it 'It.' 'It,' as Roach has proposed, 'is the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities' (*It* 8). This embodiment of undefined qualities is indeed the characteristic of folk performance. Using Roach's terms, I can say that 'folk,' as a possessor of 'It,' 'keeps a precarious balance between such mutually exclusive alternatives [*categories*]' (*It* 8). What these mutually exclusive alternatives are depends on the societal type. I argue that the determinants to define and foreground folk performance need to be selected from the particular society itself. This is important because 'to understand a concept, to grasp the meaning of the words which express it [...] in a particular socio-cultural context is to grasp the role of the concept in language and social life' (MacIntyre 2).

Loka, *deśi* and *grāmyā* are the terms used to denote folk culture and performance in India. Similar to folk, *loka*, *deśī*, and *grāmyā* as prefixes form several other terminologies, which in turn give these terms a larger meaning and context. Thus, it is important that we should take into account both the prefixes and suffixes. Let us see the contexts in which *loka* and *deśī* are used: *Loka* refers to world, world of the folk or real

materialist world and *Lokāyata* to the materialist philosophical tradition. *Loka* also stands against the Vedas and Śāstra in its etymological connotation. In conjunction with *loka*, the term *deśī* is also used for folk culture. The common people in the sense of owning something use the word *deśī*. *Deśī* or *desī* here refers to something local, regional or of the countryside. It is believed that there were two traditions within the Indian art currents: *Mārgī* (classical and Sanskritic) and *Deśī* (popular and vernacular). According to Shiva Prakash, whereas *mārgī* was inter-regional, *deśī* was regional, concomitant with the *deś* (region) and *kāl* (time). However, Mathur and Ojha claim that *deśī* was also inter-regional; at least it was not regional like the contemporary Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali and Assamese (6). *Deśī* also leads to some other associated terms; for instance, *deś* stands for land, and therefore *deśī* refers to the people and culture of that geographical land—basically, the main inhabitants who have been living there for thousands of years and share some common cultural values. In this regard, the terms *deś* and *deśī* have a feeling of cultural oneness (belonging) and oneness. Thus, *deśī* gives a sense of a cultural and poetic landscape. In a similar way, *grāmya* stands for village or rural landscape. *Loka*, *deśī* and *grāmya* give a rather complete picture of folk performance, which can otherwise be easily denied by extreme historicism on the one side and aestheticism and ethno-centricism on the other. I use these three terms, their politics and aesthetics to refer to Indian folk performances.

One inherent danger with the naming and categorization is that hegemonic institutions strive to appropriate these historicized names. For example, Rustom Bharucha (1993) shows how the name ‘folk theatre’ itself represents the middle-class urban co-option. Similarly, *deśī* is exotically packaged and *loka* is deeply institutionalized. Instead of going into the etymological debates associated with folk (which has been already discussed), it would be more useful to examine the concepts and practices invoked by such performances. In this thesis, I am using folk performance to designate specificity

and the performance of cultural labour to reclaim the politic of performance. I also think that politics embedded in the performance of cultural labour has the power to resist such hegemonic appropriations. Against this background, the term ‘cultural labour’ also opposes folksy characteristics, which might be inscribed in folk.

Anthropologists have described folk as a discrete category of a particular culture and society. Yet, the term remains at large and continues to be used flexibly. Folklorists are supposed to define folk, but, on this matter, they are like the six blind men of the Jain-Buddhist story who attempt to comprehend the shape of an elephant and end up with their own individual perceptions and subjectivity. The person who feels the elephant’s leg imagines it to be a pillar, the one who feels its tail imagines it to be a rope and so on and so forth. This also applies to the ‘cultural elephant’ or the rich field of the Indian folk performance. The person who sees the primacy efficacy of song regards it as a folksong; for another, it becomes a folk dance; for some, it is lore and for others, it is even text. In the Jain version of the above story, a Jain teacher tells the six blind men, ‘You all are right! Indeed the elephant has all those features.’ On the other hand, in the Buddhist version, a Buddhist teacher declares all of them wrong by saying that each sees merely one side of the same thing. Rumi (1207-1273), a Persian poet and Sufi teacher, in a retelling of the same story, concludes that, in fact, the elephant itself has been put in the dark. All three methodological illustrations might also be apt in the discussion of the folk performance. Thus, while the Jain perspective would suggest the possibility of multiple perspectives on folk, the Buddhist calls for a holistic approach instead and Rumi would question the fundamentals of this perspective itself. Not negating the Jain and the Buddhist approaches, I think it would be a good idea to start with Rumi’s approach, that is, by questioning the perspective that leaves little space for flexibility and contradictions. Furthermore, the predicament of folk performance rests upon the problems of our

analytical understanding, which resists flexibility and is unable to contain too many contradictions. In this regard, Bluestein makes an interesting point:

Folklorists are like physicists faced with the problems of defining matter. They know matter is there; they can see its tracks and measure its impacts, especially when it is blown up. But no one can say exactly what or even where it is, except in a general way. Faced with a similar demand, folklorists often refer to the twenty-one separate definitions. (12-13)

de Bruin also considers this flexibility as a major characteristic of the folk theatre.

Folk as an Idealtypus to Societal-typus

Some anthropologists describe folk as ‘smaller,’ ‘isolated,’ ‘homogenous,’ ‘simple’ and ‘less specialized’ classical and popular category (Srampickal 55). In the same tradition, anthropologist Robert Redfield, in his definition of folk, has constructed an ideal type of folk by contrasting folk society with modern urbanized society:

Such a society is small, isolated, non-literate and homogenous with a strong sense of group solidarity. The ways of living are conventionalized into that coherent system which we call ‘a culture’. Behaviour is traditional, spontaneous, uncritical and personal; there is no legislation or habit of experiment and reflection for intellectual ends. [...] The sacred prevails over the secular; the economy is one of status rather than of a market. These and related characterizations may be restated in terms of ‘folk mentality’. (293)

Redfield defines folk as an ideal type with Max Weber’s concept of *Idealtypus* (or pure type). He uses the terms ‘primitive’ and ‘folk’ as synonymous and interchangeable

(293). In the first instance, it appears that Redfield has used the ideal-type to mark out his study, which should not be a problem as the ideal type helps in identifying and simplifying the field of research. But, if we examine those characterizations of a folk society outlined by Redfield, then a clear pattern of typification appears which reduces culture to a type. Here, folk has been reduced to a type in which difference ceases to exist, internal contradictions disappear and external factors do not have any influence. As Foster puts it, such an *Idealtypus* definition of folk ‘stereotypes field research and obscures salient characteristics’ of folk culture (Foster 162). Surajit Sinha, following Redfield’s categorization of the great tradition and the little tradition, argues that the great traditions of India are generally characteristic of the peasantry belonging to north India (504). The inherent vulnerability of this approach is that, even when variously defined, a performance is always slotted as another type.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the ‘folk’ and the ‘urban’ are complementary and constitute each other. G.M. Foster argues that the urban is the precondition for the folk (163). Unnithan, Dev and Singh equally uphold that ‘the folk and the elite elements are complementary and the existence of the one is the pre-requisite of the other’ (qtd. in Pasayat 18). Similarly, Pasayat makes a distinction between ‘primitive’ and ‘folk’ society. For them, the former is independent, whereas the latter is dependent upon the ‘primitive’ or urban (1). Thus, common to these definitions are certain fixations and binaries. So, while one cannot deny that the folk and the urban have a symbiotic relationship, so do the folk and the primitive. However, this does not mean that the urban unit is a precondition for the existence of the folk or that folk has to be necessarily dependent on the urban unit. While Redfield forwards the ideal sanctity and homogeneity of folk. Foster, Unnithan, Dev and Singh view folk as a dependent category of some elite or primitive culture. According to this approach, folk either exists in between (the primitive and elite) or as a completely independent entity without exchanges

with other cultures. Against the concept of the folk as an ideal type (Redfield) and the folk as an incomplete culture (Foster), T.K. Oommen proposes the existence of different societal types within a given community at a given moment. He is of the view that 'our societal types are not necessarily polar or inimical and hence the co-existence of the different societal types is conceded' ('Rural-urban Continuum' 13). Oommen's definition helps us to clarify some of the major issues, but, at the same time, his ideas regarding the co-existence of different societal types generalize and project the image of a multicultural folk, which, in the garb of coexistence, not only hide power relationships but also deny the contradictions of a society and culture. The point is, as argued by Blackburn and Ramanujan, that folk culture can exist independently of elite, indigenous and other domains of culture—as a 'counterpoint' and as 'autonomous' (*Another Harmony* 1).

Folk (Performance) and its Pre-modern Past

Even after so many critical discourses on folk performances, folk's liaison with the pre-modern has not died out. In this typecast, pre-modernity has become the condition in which folk exists. This has led scholars like Adorno to remark that 'there is no longer any 'folk' whose songs and games could be taken up and sublimated by art and culture' (160). According to Adorno, 'the bourgeois process of rationalization has subordinated all society to bourgeois categories' (161). Walter Benjamin has also echoed the same by saying that the art of storytelling is coming to an end—storytelling has 'receded into the archaic' form ('The Storyteller' 83). The point comes forth strongly that folklore in the contemporary world has lost its influence and only has a marginal existence. However, Limon (1983) points out that there have not been universal factors that have influenced folk society everywhere. This observation is particularly important in the Indian context where different sections of the society live in different stages of modernization with different modes of production simultaneously.

Kathryn Hansen (1993) has grouped many folk performances under the pre-modern category. These numerous associations of folk with the ‘pre-modern’ and the ‘past’ have led folklore to become material for writing history and the past. Historians, including E. P. Thompson, have advised the researcher who is seeking to reconstruct and recover the past to consider folklore as resource material. This seems to be an important reason why, after folklorists, it is the historians who take much interest in folk culture. On the importance of folk culture in history writing, Badri Narayan, following Vladimir Popp, argues that, ‘since folk culture is a product of historical agency [...] the study of folk culture is a historical analysis’ (*Lokasānskṛiti* 11). Folklore, Narayan maintains, becomes important for both historical writing and the writing of the history of folk communities and as Taylor has proposed—performance as history in which history enacts embodied memory and non-reproducible knowledge (2006).

In India, however, the point is not that scholars have not understood the importance of folklore and folk culture in historical writing. Indian scholars like D.D.Koshambi, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Sumit Sarkar, Lal Bahadur Varma and Namvar Singh have recognized and established the importance of folklore. However, as Badri Narayan has rightly noted, their practical distance from the lower-castes, as well as a superficial knowledge of local language and dialect and an armchair approach, has hindered their analysis (*Lokasanskṛiti* 16). Moreover, they tend to understand the folk through their own theoretical models and suppositions. Narayan correctly argues that ‘a perspective may develop from the folk culture itself’ (11). No one can deny the importance of folk culture and its historical experiences, yet the past must not become the pretext to understanding folk culture, which is a culture of the living present. In this regard, I need to consider a few points. First, folk culture, like any other culture, as suggested by Egnor, ‘was not created once and for all time’ but is a continuous process (‘Internal Iconicity’ 294). Second, a methodological question arises from the fact that while historians may use

folklore to bridge the gap between two points in history, the discipline largely positions the folk as existing in the past—for instance, G. Thompson believed folklore to be ‘past states of consciousness’(43). Third, this pre-modern alliance of folklore always pits folk performance against modern performance. Many scholars, such as Hansen, also use the pre-colonial and the pre-modern interchangeably, further associating folk performance with the pre-modern. In this regard, Omvedt (2008) has shown how there were modernist trends in Indian culture even before colonialism.

Folk and its Rurality

According to Balwant Gargi, folk theatre represents the people in their natural habitat, that is, the countryside (5). Folk performances across cultures are commonly an expression of rural and peasant society, nevertheless they thrive in semi-urban peripheries and in the margins of the metropolis. Amidst growing urbanization, the migration of rural people to urban areas as well as rapid exchanges between rural and urban society, we need to examine both the urban side of the folk and the folk side of the urban life. In addition, we need to unpack the folk in, to use Freire’s phrase, ‘the culture of silence’ or in Scott’s words, in the ‘hidden scripts.’

Besides, the incorporation of folk cultural elements into industrial and corporate cultures also requires us to see their folk side—what Williams terms the ‘residual experience’ in the dominant culture, which can be incorporated, though there is something inherently oppositional and threatening in its very existence (*Marxism* 122-123). According to Williams, this ‘‘residue experience’ represents areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses or even cannot recognize’ (*Marxism* 123-124). This proposition, though highly contested, cannot be dismissed. Srampickal notes that urban centres like Calcutta and Bombay were important seats of folk culture before they came under

western influence (55). Sumanta Banerjee gives a detailed account of nineteenth-century Calcutta folk culture. He shows how the migrants from Bengal's villages imported its customs and mores (*Parlour and the Streets* 14). This seems to suggest that folk culture did not develop in urban centres. On the contrary, one could argue that folk not only migrates from villages to urban centres but also grows and flows in urban centres despite several constraints. Luigi Lombardi-Satrani has explicitly argued for the thriving existence of urban folklore (qtd. in Limon). Even in the case of nineteenth-twentieth century Calcutta folk culture, we have examples of *Jātrā* performances along with a remarkable development of popular folk paintings. At the same time, it is also true that folk maintains strong linkages with local village communities, especially in terms of landscape, imagination and the creative process.

Folk and Oral Traditions

At times, folk and oral traditions are used interchangeably such that the folk necessarily represents the oral. This essentialization of the oral facet of folk also seems to suggest that whatever is not oral is not 'folk culture'. In other words, orality seems to become the sole criteria to determine a folk performance. This criticism especially applies to the folkloric discourses. This view not only dismisses the role and scope of the text in a folk performance but also discredits the significance of body, space and material culture, which constitute important elements of any folk culture and performance per se. This amounts to saying that if everything in folk is oral, then there is nothing in it beyond recordable folklore. Paradoxically, this over-accentuation of the oral in folk society, although it looks counter-textual, ultimately relies on textual documentation. Orality becomes the basis of the folk text. As the orality of the folk represents it as a whole, the wholeness of the folk can be archived and produced as a text. On the theoretical level, as

Limon and Young note, ‘the tendency is towards the ethnographic and textual application of existing theory rather than theoretical inquiry in its own right’ (447).

On the other hand, the basic role of the text and the narrative, which play a significant role in folk performances, is downplayed. Blackburn (1988) illustrates the significant role of text and narrative in folk performance. He is of the view that ‘no approach can afford to downplay the narrative force’ in folk performance (*Singing* xvii). True to an extent but Blackburn also needs to recognize the nature of the text (narrative); and how the texts of bow songs are different from the canonical text of the elite culture, which is found in the Śāstra. Narayan Rao accurately notes that, despite being oral, the *Purāṇa* have a literary quality, and so, their orality is different from that of folk narratives (*Another Harmony* 95). In this regard, we also need to differentiate between the recitation and singing of a text—basically, between the nature and forms of text and orality. It is now evident from several studies that in the folk tradition the poem is written to be sung, the narrative is meant for performance and the text is used as an excuse since linguistic communication has no value. Effectively, the text and the narrative do not exist without performance. Therefore, scholars are right in arguing for a performance-centred approach for folk. Blackburn, on the other hand, chooses a text-centred approach to study a performance. He argues:

It is the text itself that is the proper focus of any study of an oral tradition like the bow song. The narrative ultimately controls the ritual. (*Singing* Cover Page)

Blackburn’s ‘total incorporation of context into text’ reiterates the domination of text in performance (*Singing* 148-149). Though he is right to argue that no approach can afford to downplay the narrative force that propels performance, we also need to look into the extent to which performance propels and interprets a text depending upon the time, space and communities in which it occurs. Blackburn seems to reject the claim that the

meaning of a text lies in performance and his text-centred approach to performance starts with ‘the narrative outside its enactment’ (*Singing* xviii). He claims that while the oral performance is a ritual act, its written text is a ritual object (xxi). This relationship should be seen in terms of linkages or else a ritual without performance would result in the objectification of the ritual and in undermining its dynamism and efficacies. We need to go beyond these two straightjacketed western views of seeing text in performance and performance in text. Not least important is the fact that there are elements in folk culture beyond text and performance, for example material objects in forms of artifacts.

Folk Culture and Classical Culture

Scholars like Blackburn and Ramanujan (1986) have shown overlapping connections between ‘folk’ and ‘classical’. According to them, the two have ‘overlapping themes,’ ‘rhetorical strategies’ and ‘psychological dynamics’ (Hansen *Grounds* 43). However, as Hansen correctly points out, in these analyses, no specific criteria was used to define ‘folk’ and ‘classical’. In most cases, ‘a performance genre is assumed to be ‘classical’ if its verbal texts are in the Sanskrit language (or in Tamil) and predate the modern period; and ‘folk’ is the remainder of what is left’ (43). In order to define ‘classical’ and ‘folk’, Hansen has suggested that instead of looking into texts, codes and themes, one needs to give consideration to ‘the sources of a tradition’s authority, its mode of reproduction and its relations to dominant social groups’ (43). With respect to classical, she has proposed three considerations, textual authority, textual tradition and the support and patronage of a dominant group (44). Although Hansen recognizes the existence of power relationships, which come from the authority and dominant groups, she focuses mainly on text. Not surprisingly, her criteria of defining classical culture fail to work in the case of many performances. For instance, we can take the case of *Rāmalīlā of Rāmanagar*. This *Rāmalīlā* incorporates text as well as performance and is patronised

by both the dominant group (the local king of Ramnagar) and the common people. The performance cannot be defined as classical despite having a textual authority from a dominant group. Sarkar-Munsi also argues that Hansen takes the Sanskrit history project as the general background of classical genres, which is not entirely true. In her view, it is the codes, texts and references to unbroken tradition that have been constantly assembled to turn many oral, folk, local and community traditions into assembled 'classical' genres, such as Manipuri dance ('Discussion').

Coomaraswamy maintained that folklore in India should not be contrasted with the classical tradition (qtd. in Blackburn & Ramanujan 14). Similarly, they also argue that classical and folk represent only different expressions of the same tradition and not different traditions as such (*Another Harmony* 14). They summarize Indian folklore in terms of two modalities: 'complementary with classical traditions and as a cultural whole' (22). The rhetoric of different expressions of the same tradition implies, for both Coomaraswamy and Ramanujan, the use of canonical classical theories to analyse folk performances. For Coomaraswamy, Sanskrit Vedic philosophy was used to understand popular religion, while Ramanujan utilizes the classical *akam-puram* (exterior and interior landscape) division to analyse Tamil folklore.

Of course, there are exchanges that occur between the folk and classical cultures; and they also have overlapping themes. Yet, while these scholars discuss the complementarities, they tend to overlook the conflicts that exist between classical and folk culture in terms of class, culture and language. However, the folk culture has not always been under pressure of the classical elite culture; in fact, even Śāstra, as Namvar Singh puts it, 'under the popular pressure of folk adopted several of its elements and avoided the emergent conflict' (78). On the other hand, folk has also adopted some norms of Śāstra through the process of acculturation. In this process, both Śāstra and *loka* have shaped each other. Nevertheless, the conflicts between the two need to be recognized.

Several scholars have argued that the problem of classical and folk is class based. Marxist thinker John Irvin (1946), in his essay, 'The Class struggle in Indian History and Culture,' uses the contradiction between folk and classical Brahminical religious cultures as the primary class-contradiction of Indian history. Likewise, Namvar Singh argued that the primary contradiction in medieval India was the conflict between Śāstra (dominant elite) and *loka* (subordinate popular) (77). The *Bhakti* movement can also be cited as an example. Even today, the conflict between Śāstra and *loka* is one of the major conflicts in Indian society. Yet, scholars generally tend to overlook it.

Krishnadev Upadhyay divides traditional *sanskriti* (culture) into two categories: *śiṣṭa-sanskriti* (Sanskritized elite culture) and *loka-sanskriti* (popular folk culture) (*Bhojpurī Sahityā* 2). According to him, while the highly educated people in a traditional society—philosophers, scholars, priests, monks—follow the written rules and laws of the Vedas (*Veda*), *Puranas*(*Purāṇa*) and *Smritis* (*Smṛti*) and represent the *śiṣṭa-sanskriti* (Sanskritized elite culture), the beliefs, myths, mores, morals, lifestyles and personal behaviours of the common people come under folk culture (*loka-sanskriti*). Therefore, he argues, while the Veda, Śāstra, *Āgama* and *Nigama* are the sources of Brahminical upper-caste culture; people themselves are the source of folk culture (2). Upadhyay sees the differences as very clear: *Indra*, *Varuṇ*, *Ūśhā*, *Rāma* and *Kriṣṇa* are part of the *śiṣṭa-sanskriti* (Brahminical elite culture); while *Dīh*, *Dīhvara*, *Bhūt-dūt*, *Preta-pisāca*, basically, lower-caste deities and spirits are part of the *loka-sanskriti* (folk culture). While Upadhyay's analysis is valid to a certain extent, his ideas of classical and folk are again based on a very homogenous understanding of folk culture and its symbolisms. For instance, one can argue that *Rāma*, *Kriṣṇa* and *Viṣṇu* are not only part of the elite culture but are also popular among some of the lower-caste and Adivasi communities. Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas* (2005), Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus* (2010) and the works

of A.K. Ramanujan, among others, exemplify the way in which different communities interpret the same narratives and images in different ways.

Perhaps, the fundamental problem lies in the authoritative, institutionalized and hegemonic languages and hierarchies embedded in elite culture. Apart from these binaries, there exist others in context of secular and religious divisions, social and aesthetic drama distinctions, etc. Perhaps, the most artificial division of the Indian folk performance lies in the categorization of dance, music, songs and theatre as separate genres. While some of these determinants are not very significant, most are not only outdated but, in a way, also contribute to outdating Indian folk performances, e.g., Hansen's 'pre-modern theatre', Sivathambi's 'ancient Tamil Drama', Mathur's '*paurāṇika nātaka*' (ancient drama) and Singer's 'little tradition'.

3. Sociology of Cultural Labour

It is popularly said about Ahīr that however wise an Ahīrs can become, he cannot sing except for the Lorikāyan (*Katno Ahīr hoy sayānā, Lorik choṇa na gawhi gānā*). The *Ahīrs* (*Yādavas*) are a dominant lower-caste group from north India whose folk performance (ballad) is called the *Lorikāyan* (the life-story of *Lorik*).¹¹ The above-mentioned saying does not just apply to the Ahīrs, but to almost all the lower-castes in Bihar, who have their own caste-based performances. For example, *Dina-Bhadri* is performed by *Musahars*, *Reśamā-Cuharmala* and *Sahaleśa* by the *Dusādhs*, *Mam̐sārāma* and *Chhechhanmala*, by the *Doms*, *Lukesri*, by the *Chamars* and so on. In a descriptive analysis of some folk epics, Indra Dev observed that 'this must have something to do with the fact that the epic lays are generally sung by people belonging to the lower strata of society like *Netuā*, *Telī* and *Ahīrs*' (62). Based on such accounts, we can say that not only are folk performances divided along caste lines but in each of these performances, the

¹¹ Lorik was supposed to be a legendary ancestor of the *Ahīrs*, who fought against feudal atrocities.

corresponding caste is also performed. Since caste, not religion acts as the major contradiction of folk society (although the caste system is also sanctioned by religion), caste becomes the main motif in folk performances across India. As discussed, the performance of cultural labour in India is implanted in *jāti-chetnā* (caste-consciousness). The performance of cultural labour as a genealogy of caste-based performance and caste-consciousness is reflected in the languages of the performers (Dube 16).

N.B Dirks (2001) warns anthropologists and others against essentializing caste as a core condition of Indian society (16). Similarly, A.K. Ramanujan cautions us not to take folklore as the culture of the lower-castes. However, the field data clearly shows that folk performances inherently are the culture of the Dalits and other lower-castes. D. Venkat Rao points out that we should have the courage to acknowledge the existence of *jāti-saṃskṛiti* in most forms of our folk culture (Personal Interview 27 Dec. 2010). Thereby indicating that most of the folk genres in India have emerged from *jāti-saṃskṛiti*, though there are variations in this trend. According to D. Venkat Rao, ‘Each *jāti* (caste) over a long period of time has developed its own languages as well as narrative, song-culture and performative traditions. Each *jāti* has its own distinction too’ (Personal Interview 27 Dec. 2010). Mahendra Narayan Ram makes a similar point by saying that, in the *Mithila* region of Bihar, most of the castes have their own gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits (Ram *Bhao-Bhagait* 33). While acknowledging that there are also some folk performances that have broken away from such caste lineages, my fieldwork in Bihar supports the broader claim that, in most cases, folk performances from below have emerged from caste-based culture. This claim is further supported by the studies on the folk culture of Telangana, which has strong living traditions of the *Jambu Purāṇa* (caste-based epic traditions of Dalits) (Charlsey 2004).

Since caste is linked to the specific nature of the evolution of Indian society, therefore, it has become a part of the human constitutive process in terms of cultural

expression. From a theatre and performance studies' point of view, it can be broadly argued that the caste system is the politics of performance spaces, for example, where you can perform and where you cannot perform; politics is an enactment of power through performance and performance is a representation of the political and cultural identity of different castes in performance. While performance is dynamic, its performativity can be constrained by the caste system, which works against the mobility of caste status. As a rigid Indian social system, the caste system acts as a hegemonic control on performance spaces, maintaining hierarchical relationships between different forms of performance and an absolute control on performing bodies and languages. In this way, the caste system not only erases the efficacy of performance but also entextuates the performing body; accordingly, the body moves within a ritualized and marked performance space. In such a situation, both the caste system and caste-based performances are maintained.

Many scholars have argued that ritual and performance play a major role in maintaining the caste system and bondage relations (Raheja 1988; G. Prakash 1999), where performance becomes what Limon calls an 'accommodating ideology' (1994). But as Scott (1987), Limon (1994) and Narayan (2001) have argued, such a performance can resist domination through performance strategies in order to come out of marginality.

4. Archaeology of Cultural Labour

Baba Saheb [Ambedkar] burnt the *Manusmṛiti*

Why did he Burn it?

The Buddha said, 'find the sources of your pain'

Who gave Officer Manohar Kadam the order to fire [on Dalits]?

Was it the Chief Minister Manohar Joshi or Bal Thackrey [Shiv Sena chief]?

This order came from the *Manusmṛti* (Bhai Sangare in *Jai Bhim Comrade*).¹²

Archaeology of cultural labour is important in the light of Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks' consideration that 'performance and archaeology are social practices, or modes of cultural production and social practice has performative and archaeological dimension' (53). Following Gopal Guru's *Archaeology of Untouchability*, I would argue that the performance of cultural labour is now being performed in a more subtle form than ever before. Therefore, together with sociological and anthropological analysis, we need the archaeology and psychology of performance to access the meaning underneath and its mental impact. Guru finds archaeology more effective in accessing this complexity because 'archaeology deals not so much with a need to invent but a need to discover an essence or truth that gets covered in subtle form' (Guru & Sarukkai 2003). This is also important because these subtle forms in representation may lead to the misrepresentation of a social reality. In this light, we need not only to discuss what performers of cultural labour are performing and representing, but also why they are performing and what they are performing: basically, the condition of performativity. This is significant because the meanings of cultural labour are inseparable from their day-to-day struggles (Rege 2009).

Guru further argues that this archaeology of casteism has been created through the conversion of ecological elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether or sound) into the sociological hierarchies (206). For example, earth or mud is considered to be ritually polluting, so the people and material objects associated with it are considered the same. Guru quotes *Manusmṛti*, which prescribes that the members of the top layer in the social hierarchy are not supposed to soil their hands with either earth or mud (207). Thus, the performers and performance associated with mud are viewed as sources of ritual pollution. In the same way, fire is considered as a source of purification; therefore,

¹² In 1997, Dalits in Maharashtra protested against the desecration of Ambedkar's statue with footwear, the police opened fire killing 10 members of the community and Vilash Ghoghre, a popular leftist singer hung himself in the protest. That time the Maharashtra chief minister was from the *Shiva-sena* of Bal Thackeray.

women and the Dalits are put on fire not only to punish them but also to purify them. I will be looking at this connection again while discussing the ballad of *Reśamā-Cuharamala*. This archaeological framework is very much encoded in the material sphere of cultural labour in which material objects get the sacred or profane status.

But, according to Guru, this archaeology can be only applied in the contexts where meanings are hidden, for example, in the Indian urban areas. He is of the view that ‘it cannot be applied in the rural contexts where caste hierarchies are played out openly’ (218). In contrast, I think that the archaeology is also needed in the performance of cultural labour and in rural contexts: not to expose the blatant discrimination it openly faces but to reveal the discrimination it tends to hide in the streets and on the stage. In this regard, archaeology of performance can help us in exposing the contradictions of performers and spectators of the cultural labour. For example, in the ballad of *Reśamā-Cuharamala*, Chuharmal as an untouchable constantly hides his caste identity and uses the *Kṣhatriya* identity to represent himself. For instance, archaeology of performance can reveal why Chuharamal has to act in such a manner.

This archaeology of cultural labour is sustained and redeemed through rituals and scriptures. Scholars and practitioners have already discussed how caste system is maintained through the Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmṛti* and the *Śrīmad bhagavad gītā*. In the field of Indian theatre and performance, *Nāṭyaśāstra* as the text and code of archaeological evidence plays a role similar to the *Manusmṛti*. To illustrate my point, I would like to discuss some of the most explicit evidences described in the origin story of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Explaining the origin of *Nāṭya*, Bharata says:

When *Kritāyuga* (the Golden Age) passed with the reign of Svaayambhuva

And *Tretāyuga* (the Silver Age) commenced with the rule of Vaivasvata Manu

Under the sway of desire and greed, people were getting inclined to *Grāmyādharmā* [popular folk culture of the common villagers]¹³

Then gods under the leadership of Indra went to meet Brahma and requested him To devise a play by which Śūdra (the lower-castes) can be instructed in the *Vedas* [As Śūdras were mainly involved in *Grāmyādharmā*, who could not follow Vedic rules because the *Vedas* were in Sanskrit].

Brahma said, ‘let it be so’ and the fifth *Veda* is created for all the *varṇā* people.

(Bharata ‘Chapter 1’ Verse 6-12)

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* (or *Nāṭyaveda*), unlike the other Vedas, is generally considered a democratic treatise accessible to all the *varṇas* (people of all caste and colours) including the Śūdras, who otherwise had no access to the Vedas. The rules determining access to a Veda were very stern. According to these rules, if any Śūdras were found uttering a single word from the Vedas, then they were punished and their tongues were cut out. It was deemed that in case they dared to remember even a word of the Vedas, then their body should be split into two (*Gautam Dharma Sūtra*). So, why did the protectors of Vedic religions, become so eager to make the Vedas (the ‘treasure of knowledge’) accessible to everyone, including the lowest Śūdras? One may wonder if this text is just a myth (falsehood). Even if it is a myth then in performance studies, the myth becomes an inscription through which one can read the hierarchies of power relationships.

A cursory reading of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* reveals that the real purpose was not to make the ‘treasure of knowledge’ accessible to all but rather to impose an archaeology, which would serve as an institution of bondage for the Śūdras. As Samkuty puts it, ‘*Nāṭyaśāstra* is a systematic programme for defining social hierarchy, detailing social life and mores, above all, a book of law enforcement’ (4). *Nāṭya*, devised on the Vedas, functioned as an institution to legalize bondage and maintain labour-exploitation through

¹³ In Vedic Hindu philosophy, *Grāmyadharmā* (also, folk religion or folk-life) stands against *Mokṣadharmā*, which is the philosophy of theological liberation.

the caste-*varṇa*-hierarchy. It is not surprising that each caste was allotted specific functions and roles in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Even the stage was designed in four colours as ‘the representative of four *varṇas*: Brahmins, *Kṣatriyas*, *Vaiśyas* and *Śūdras* (Srampickal 64). I read the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an attempt very similar to the revival of Indian classical dance and music, in which not only were the cultures of lower orders appropriated but also re-articulated to reinforce hierarchy through scriptures. This is important in the light of Scott’s statement that, like slavery and serfdom, ‘caste subordination represents an institutionalized arrangement for appropriating labour, goods and services from subordinate populations’ (*Domination x*).

The politics of subordination is further revealed when the *Nāṭyaśāstra* claims that ‘*Nāṭya* was brought down to earth in order to restrict the vulgar ways of the ‘outside’ popular performances’, for example, those of the *bahyikagrāmya* dharma [religious outcastes] (Mehta 113-14). Hence, it is evident that the concepts of the ‘immoral’, the ‘obscene’, the ‘ideal’ and the ‘civilized’ are not something new in the politics of Indian performance that necessarily came with colonial Victorian values. Rege (2002) has shown this connection in the context of slavery and the aristocratic and Brahminical feudal culture. Nonetheless, these values were consolidated during the colonial and the nationalist periods when mother Victoria met mother India.

The archaeology of *Nāṭyaśāstra* also divulges the whole gamut of the hegemonic politics of representation. It describes the first play, *Samundramanthan* (Churning of the Sea), in which the *Asuras* (according to many accounts, they were Adivasis) were shown as defeated. Against this (mis)representation, the Asura members among the audiences went on a rampage. They burnt the stage to the ground and paralysed the memory and the speech of the actors. In return, they were badly beaten by the gods. When Brahma, the creator of the *nāṭya*, asked them why they were spoiling the theatrical performance, *Asuras* replied that ‘the dramatic arts you have introduced show us in an unfavourable

light; you should not have represented us like this.’ Brahma told them: ‘This is only a performance!’ (Chapter 1 *Verse* 98-105).

Of course, the performance of *Samundramanthan* was not just a performance that had contingent value; rather it had monumental reverberations. Indeed, the performance established *Asuras* as the villainous characters in many popular performances, permanently. This image of *Asuras* gives an archaeological evidence of the normative image, which has become so popular in the repertoire of popular myth. Similarly, Urmimala Sarkar (2010) has shown this politics in the context of gender and body politics in Indian classical dance. She discusses how hierarchical gender relations and ideal bodies were reinforced through this canonical text.

In fact, the story of the origin of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, besides inaugurating classical elite art, is also an indirect text of the performance of cultural labour, in which two class cultures are very much mutually co-produced through the Hegelian dialectics of master and slave. This origin story of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* gives an outline of the theatre archaeology.

5. Psychology of Cultural Labour

The psychology of the folk performance as cultural labour cannot be understood in terms of ‘folk psychology’ or the psychology based on common sense. On the other hand, psychoanalysis cannot become a methodological tool for a society where the concept of a person is not defined in terms of an individual, but in terms of what Marriot (1976) calls the ‘dividual’. The psychology of cultural labour, in fact, needs critical psychology of alienation to explore the socially induced inferiority and superiority complexes in (re)presentation. Psychology can be helpful in explaining the attitude of the elite towards cultural labour and explaining the psychology of the performers and communities of the cultural labour. For the psychological understanding of the oppressed communities, Fanon’s approach remains the best, which takes psychology and socio-

economic factors to understand the prejudices and violence. Fanon defined culture as ‘the combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow-men’ (*African Revolution* 32). Following Fanon, the performance of cultural labour can be studied in relationship of caste, labour, and culture. There are cultures with castism and there are cultures without casteism. Fanon criticized Jungian collective unconsciousness, which was a mere product of inherited cerebral matter. However, the collective unconsciousness, according to Fanon, without having to fall back on genes, is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths and collective attributes of a given group. He argues that if the collective unconsciousness is cultural then it can be acquired (*Black Skin* 188). This explains several practices of cultural labour where the performers of cultural labour adopt norms contradictory to their historical experiences. Simultaneously, the psychology of cultural labour is based on the internalization of the societal inequity as well as physical and epistemological violence. Fanon’s approach is also important because it gives a central emphasis on culture in understanding social psychology. In this regard, race and caste despite having many differences (both at the structural and cultural levels) also have many similarities. Like race, caste system is also based on the basic hierarchical assumption that proclaims the superiority of one caste over others. Not surprisingly, we can draw many parallels and establish much similar psychological behaviour, which operate in a caste-based society. Fanon discusses the role of cultural representation where Blacks try to de-historicize their experiences and identify with White culture. We can find similar representation in the performances of cultural labour where Dalits and other lower-castes use the rhetoric and symbols of the upper-castes. In the performance of *Bhūmi-pūjā*, we also see why and how the world of the lower-castes either becomes the repository for all malevolence of the world or the world of the Brahminical moral gods. Fanon discusses the double damage in this process, which can be equally applied to the cultural labour. In this ‘double damage’,

not only do the lower-castes take the prejudice of the upper-castes, they also use the Brahminical values to understand and make sense of themselves in their performances. But if some of the performances face double damage and then there are performances where the performance of cultural labour is going through a radical decolonization.

6. Historiography of Cultural Labour

Their sooty complexions, their coal-black cheeks, their haggard eyes, their long-extended arms, their gaping mouths and their puerile attire, excite disgust. For the screeching of the night-owl, the howling of the jackals, and the barking of the dogs are harmony itself compared to their horrid yells [...]. The principal actors during the interludes are [sic] *Mehtar* [or Metahar] [*member of the lowest caste in the Hindu social order*] who enters the stage with a broomstick in his hand and cracks a few stupid jests which set the audience in a roar of laughter. (The *Calcutta Review* qtd. in S. Chatterjee 120)

Sudipto Chatterjee (2007) succinctly noted that the *Jātrā* was despised by the British, thus, too, by the upper-caste puritanical *bābus*, ‘especially those with an English education’ (120). However, colonial education was only one of the factors behind the *bābus*’ scorning of the *Jātrā*. Besides their English education, the puritanical *bābus*’ scorn for the *Jātrā* and other similar performances also derives from several other social and aesthetic factors, which include the *bābus*’ caste, class, religious beliefs and most importantly a deep-seated abhorrence for manual labour. From an aesthetic point of view, the display of polluted material bodies, manual labour and obscenity incited aesthetics of disgust in the minds of both the colonialists as well as the upper-caste elites. This ‘aesthetics of disgust’ had a greater influence on the *bābus* because of their ritualized

culture and labour sanctified by canonical religious texts and archaeological elements (I will discuss it in a later section).

In colonial historiography, commonly practised by colonial administrators and officials, Indian folk performances were approached in two different reductionist ways: as a lost genre of classical Sanskrit theatre and as a genre of folklore. They were not considered dramatic literature; neither were they regarded refined enough to be theatrical performances. For example, Sylvain Levi, based on some Sanskrit dramatic texts, postulated that ‘Indian drama was so literary that it often appears to be unfit for the stage’ (7). On the other hand, the whole performative aspect of folklore was reduced to oral texts. Interestingly, while folk culture was considered as a ‘repository of the ‘vernacular’ mind,’ it was also presented as something that existed in the past, a performance of the antiquities that needed to be collected and archived for the future (Chandra qtd. in Blackburn *Print* 3). This reveals an inherent contradiction and deliberate undervaluing of popular folk culture. Folk performance as folklore became a great ‘enterprise’ for the colonials. For example, the story of *Reśamā-Cuharamala* as folklore attracted a good amount of documentation. The folklorists tried to find the ‘authentic’ version of *Reśamā-Cuharamala*, which indeed never existed. In most of the Indian theatre, performance and literary historiography, this politics of representation has been largely attributed to the rhetoric and linguistic strategies of colonialism. Though the rhetoric and linguistic strategies of colonialism cannot be undermined, the entirety of the politics of such a representation, as argued by scholars like Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Ania Loomba (1998), Benita Parry (2004) and Vivek Chibber (2013) which includes ‘diverse historical and geopolitical fields, cannot be reduced to the singular category and experience of colonialism’ (Gopal 8). Within postcolonial studies this absence of labour and capital has to do with the colonial discourse analysis, which, according to Rege, ‘delineates’ all other discourses, *including the discourses of caste and labour*’ (emphasis added) (1040).

Unlike their colonial counterparts, the emphasis of the Indian folklorists was on cultural regeneration and revival, which played a significant role in the development of nationalist folk imageries. Folklore provided fluid material that could be moulded into desired forms to create the desired culture of the imagined communities. While the folkloric approaches present ethno-centric descriptions of Indian folk performance, in the approaches to Indian theatre and performance studies, the study of folk performance remains confined to the study of institutionalized, middle-class 'folk', which is 'essentially an urban and elitist construct' (Bharucha *Theatre and the World* 200).

Although the postcolonial theatre discourses of decolonization have exposed the epistemic violence embedded in colonial scholarship, as well as its continuity, resistance and negotiation in postcolonial discourses (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996; de Bruin in L. Singh 2009), the decolonization model of Indian postcolonial scholarship is full of paradoxes. It was not only English, as a language, Ahmed points out, that rendered a cultural link between the colonial and postcolonial phases of the bourgeois state (Ahmad 74). Thiong'o, in the context of postcolonial theatre, notes how the petty-bourgeois approach to the decolonization process was 'limited by the very imperialist tradition from which it was trying to break away' (*Decolonization of the Mind* 41). G.N. Saibaba has also noted this in the context of Indian writing in English by showing that 'the critical practice in [contemporary] Indian writing is dominated by the colonialist constructions' (62). Situated in a similar neo-colonial context, the same can be stated about Indian theatre and performance scholarship, where counter-discourse has assimilated the language of the dominant. Most postcolonial scholarships want to escape essentialism.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that in order to escape completely from essentialism, one should not try to deny the permanences and the invariants, which are indisputably, part of historical reality, but rather one must reconstruct the history of the historical labour of dehistoricization (qtd. in Savran 2004). An understanding of colonialism without

capitalist exploitation leads to what Dirlik calls any other kind of ethnocentric representations (1994). As pointed out by Rege, ‘these thoroughgoing critiques of Eurocentricism sideline the critique of capitalism, as if these two can be separated’ (1039). However, it is not only capitalism, but also issues related to *jāti* (caste)-feudalism that has been ignored in the present theatre and cultural historiography. For instance, in most dance and theatre historiographies, the political economy of *devadāsī* and the predominance of female slaves, whose sale was part of the royal state enterprise, has been reduced to the colonialist and nationalist moral coding (Rege 2002). This becomes more complex if one asks questions like ‘what was the upper-caste attitude towards the lower-castes in pre-colonial period’ or ‘what was the attitude of the upper classes towards the lower orders in British society’.¹⁴ Scholars have already argued that such representations of popular cultures of the lower orders were nothing new in Indian pre-colonial feudal and aristocratic society (Rege 2001; Torri 2009). These crystallized further with capitalist exploitation under colonialism, which augmented the hatred for the lower orders.

Culturalist scholars have generally ignored the political economy of this representation, which cannot be separated from the *jāti*-feudal and capitalist exploitation of human labour and cultural resources. Only by keeping all these factors in mind, one can provide a critical historiography of Indian folk performances. Otherwise, there is an inherent danger that we may end up justifying one or the other kinds of nativism and sheer romanticization of pre-colonial or postcolonial culture and performance. The anti-colonial nationalist movements have been uncritically reduced to the right-wing agendas of the nationalist bourgeoisie without placing them in their proper historical context (Ahmad 1992). Firstly, at that time Indian nationalism was the movement of a colonized and oppressed nationality. Secondly, there are also more contestatory versions of

¹⁴ See Rege’s *Conceptualizing Popular Culture* (2002) for representation in the pre-colonial period, and Stallybrass and Whites’ *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) for the representation of lower-orders in Britain.

nationalism (Gopal 2005). For example, both the upper-caste and lower-caste Hindu reformists supported the ban on *devdāsī* but their interests and concerns were entirely different in nature. As pointed out by Lakshmi Subramanyam:

The Anti-nautch campaign drew considerable support from a wide spectrum of opinion; for some it was only a campaign against an obscene and social practice that offended the moral sensibilities, for others it became part of the larger emancipatory discourse for women. (129)

In particular, the lower-caste reformers supported the ban because they saw *devdāsī* as a system of slavery and sexual exploitation of lower-caste women and not because they subscribed to the idea of the ‘ideal woman’ of the nation. Of course, the nationalist bourgeoisie had their own class limitations and hegemonic interests, which need to be interrogated, but not uncritically and ahistorically. An uncritical analysis of a homogenous idea of Indian nationalist and reformist movements gives an impression that the anti-colonial struggle was a right-wing nationalist movement. For instance, Partha Chatterjee provides not any sufficient reason why progressive nationalists were part of the orientalist colonial discourse (Chibber 274). We need to acknowledge that whatever criticisms and repercussions it might have, the Indian nationalist movement under colonialism was also an anti-colonial struggle. We also need to acknowledge that ‘socio-political thought in colonial India represents multiplicities of ideas’ (Guru ‘The Idea of India’ 36). In fact, the approaches of lower-caste intellectuals and practitioners were sympathetic towards folk performances. We can cite the works of Jyotiba Phule and the *Satyasodhak Samāj* (The Society of Seekers of Truth) in this regard. They used the folk genres of *Tamāśā* and *Powādā* to reach out to the peasants and lower-castes; Phule explicitly said that ‘our ignorant community inclines towards *Tamāśā*- [...] they don’t like lectures’ (Omvedt ‘Satyāsodhak’ 1973). These debates are important because they

provide the bases for the discourse on the performance of cultural labour. I see four major reasons behind the marginalisation of Indian folk performance in academic discourses.

First, Indian folk performance remains marginalized in theatre scholarship because, as discussed by many scholars, the dominant view amounted to a ‘rejection of culturally specific drama,’ by both the colonials and their native elites, ‘for not adhering to normative conventions’ (Gilbert and Tompkins 53).¹⁵ For instance, Indian theatre performances were judged either by the yardsticks of western realism and western dramatic tradition (Mee 2; Dutt 26; S. Chatterjee 50) or by the normative conventions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Singh 2009; Dutt and Munsri 2010). I argue that these normative conventions are deeply embedded, to varying degrees, in the existing approaches, from the colonialist methodology to the present subaltern studies’ historiography.

Second, this rejection is not simply a question of normative convention; it is more than that. Otherwise, how is it that while the folk experiments of theatre directors, such as K.N. Panikkar, Girish Karnad and Ratan Thiyam among others, are taken seriously within scholarship, but similar styles and popular folk genres of cultural labour are not considered worthy of discussion? As is evident, what theatre is, what it is not, whose historiographies will be written, and whose not, is as much a question of self-reflexivity as the abhorrence of labour. The existing historiographies of Indian theatre and performances (with some exceptions), no matter how admirable and ideologically progressive, are still full of the residual strains of elitism and often reflect the deep-seated beliefs in middle-class institutionalized theatre practices.

The third reason is related to the second; it refers to some scholars’ armchair approach towards folk performances and a dependency on printed and archival materials, which, while providing some important views about community, may not access the expressivity, which is ‘inextricable from its human creators’ (Conquergood ‘Moral Act’

¹⁵ Normative conventions in the Indian context refer to both the classical forms and western realistic drama.

2). As Conquergood argues, interpreting a cultural field, without encountering or experiencing it, may leave a gap, which cannot be bridged because ‘opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books’ (‘Moral Act’ 2).

Fourth, this misinterpretation and marginalization has also happened precisely because the focus of the discourse has been on criticism and counter-discourse, rather than providing an alternative methodological departure. Equally important is the scholar’s own class position and bias, which is very much exemplified in the discourse around the middle-class languages of representation.

Apart from these reasons, the problem of historiography of the performance of cultural labour has to do with the common problem related to the historiography of popular. Savran (2004) pointed out at least five reasons, which can be linked to the problems of historiography of popular. The first is related to the question of interdisciplinarity (216). Since folk theatre performance is a multi-medial performance, as de Bruin describes, it ‘requires an implicit or explicit theorization of the multiple’ (‘Lecture’ 2012). The second problem, according to Savran, is related to genre because no theatre form incorporates as many genres as popular. Third is the politics of pleasure, which seems to be part of the commercial popular theatre but not with all genres of the performance of cultural labour. Fourth is the embedment of identity in performance. Genre represents a social as well as cultural identity. Finally, the characteristic of anti-theatricality makes it difficult to understand it from the theatre studies approach.

7. Aesthetics of Cultural Labour

Based on *ānandabhūti* (aesthetic delight), Indian elitist tradition of aesthetics tends to exclude the aesthetic experiences not based on *ānandabhūti*. In this tradition, it is assumed that tragedy does not exist in Indian theatre and performance traditions. The art and performance traditions that do not show this characteristic of *ānandabhūti* are

excluded from the aesthetic category. Not surprisingly, Indian Dalit literature and performances are said to be bereft of aesthetic qualities by many Indian aestheticians (Limbale 2005). Some of those aestheticians have to argue that because the oppressed communities do not have the moment of *ānanda* (delight) in their life, their aesthetic experience is reduced to emotional and social outcry. The question then comes as to ‘how a performance of cultural labour can be put into the aesthetic category?’

Some of the Dalit scholars and aestheticians are of the view that they need to create different aesthetic categories based on Dalits’ social experiences. For example, Yadunath Thate has proposed some alternative *rasās* to discuss the Dalit aesthetics—the *rasās* of pain, anger and suffering (qtd. in Limbale 12). While, Indian classical views on aesthetics suggest that tragedy is the prerogative of high culture, it is indeed one of the major motifs in lower-caste performances. For example, as a performer Gaddar argues, ‘How can tragedy not exist in art and performance when common people’s life itself is full of tragedy’ (Personal Interview 28 Dec. 2011). Gaddar’s point is evident from the fact that, unlike most of the Sanskrit plays, in most caste-based ballads and performances, the protagonists die a commoner’s death. For example, in the *Dīnā-Bhādrī* performance of the *Musahar* community of Bihar, *Lorikāyan* of the *Yādavas* and the epic of *Reśamā-Cuharamala*, the protagonists Dina and Bhadri, Lorik and Reshma and Chuharamal, respectively, all die a tragic death like commoners. The examples show that tragedy is an important aesthetic element in the aesthetic traditions of the lower-castes. In a similar way, ‘violence occupies a portion of the cultural category that includes the aesthetic’ in the performance of cultural labour (Roach *Cities of the Dead* 41). The interpretation of Indian aesthetics based solely upon aesthetic delight is not only hegemonic but also eccentric. The aesthetic category, according to some Dalit scholars, basically needs to be viewed from a socio-political perspective. From this perspective, scholars like Limbale and Sharad Patil have carried out a remarkable study on the aesthetics of Dalit literature

and performance (Limbale 36). While not denying the significance of social and political factors in the lower-caste performances, there is no reason why Dalit aesthetics, or for that matter the aesthetics of any oppressed communities, cannot be analysed from the aesthetic perspectives. The point is that the construction of aesthetic criteria limited to pain, anger and suffering can further stereotype the Dalit arts and culture and can only represent their vulnerability. My analysis of the four performances shows how the compartmentalization of aesthetics around ‘aesthetic delight’ and ‘vulnerability’ is too narrow against the vast panorama of the aesthetic elements embedded in the performance of cultural labour.

In this regard, William Adams rightly argues that ‘to understand aesthetic artifacts and sensibilities fully, one must know something about the actual worlds in which artistic production and consumption occur’ (254). This point becomes particularly significant while discussing the performance of cultural labour. As discussed above, the world of the performance of cultural labour is marked by the labour and (re)production relationship. Since the performance of cultural labour ruptures the boundary between artistic activities and labour activities and between creation and production, one can view artistic activity from labour and labouring bodies and labouring activities from artistic activities in reciprocal manner. For example, one can understand the nature of colonial displacement in the songs of *Bidesiyā*, while *Bidesiyā* itself is product of colonial displacement. The question is, how one should approach the question of aesthetics in the performance of cultural labour. In this regard, I found Jacques Rancière’s definition of aesthetic appropriate to understand the aesthetics of cultural labour. For Rancière,

Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding form of visibility and

possible ways of thinking about their relationship with the community [*emphasis added*]. (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 10)

Rancière evokes the ‘distribution of the sensible’ to understand the politics and aesthetics of artistic practices. This distribution includes the distribution of spaces, times and forms of visibility that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and the way various individuals have a part in this distribution. For example, in *Bhūmi-pūjā*—one of the four performances I am studying in this thesis—unlike the dominant religions, where deities have higher places, the relationship with deities is more democratic. The deities can be levelled and can be criticized. Similarly, unlike the dominant mode of sphere, the centre does not hold in *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance. Similarly, in the case of *Bidesiyā*, the division between audiences and performers is not so rigid, not in spatial terms but in terms of dialogic exchanges. One of the reasons that the performance of cultural labour is not recognized as a work of art is because it is not able to suspend suspense itself from ‘the ordinary forms of sensory experience’ (Rancière 23). This distribution of the sensible speaks a lot about the aesthetics of cultural labour. However, the aesthetics of cultural labour cannot be identified separately from the creative and social production. Artistic identity, after all, cannot be reduced to the social identity in terms of sex, caste, gender and labour, nor can art be reduced to ideology. Art, as Brecht defines it, is a ‘peculiar and fundamental human capacity: not a disguise for morality or a prettification of knowledge but an independent discipline that represents the various other disciplines in a contradictory manner’ (Brecht *Messingkauf* 96). Following this, aesthetics, as the philosophy of art, is the study of that peculiar and fundamental human capacity. This capacity can be defined as a non-alienated condition of the senses in an idealised situation of cultural labour. The oppressed communities who are commonly engaged are from time to time denied this fundamental human capacity, the freedom of creation and the right to perform in a free

manner. Therefore, the liberation of the senses and the movement towards non-alienation become the central characteristics of the performance of cultural labour. Since they are also a historically subjugated community, the (re)embodiment of ‘broken’ bodies becomes a constant theme in their performances. For example, an outcaste poet, Sant Ravidas, dreams of ‘a city without sorrow.’ He calls himself a ‘tanner now set free’ (Omvedt *Seeking* 7). In the songs of the *Bidesiyā*, the migrant workers want to be part of their own cultural landscape; in *Reśamā-Cuharamala*, Chuhamal wants to share food with his upper-caste friend and the performance of Gaddar is all about a non-alienated society. Of course, this interpretation is not as simple as I suggest here. It involves several complexities; and it is mediated by a number of factors. The distribution of the sensible makes a common basis to study the politics and aesthetics of the performance of cultural labour: both the hierarchical distribution and the egalitarian distribution.

8. Geographies of the Performance and Contemporary Scenes

The discussion of the geographies of the performance of cultural labour becomes vital for many reasons. Firstly, the performances of cultural labour are embedded in ‘a topographic phenomenon of both natural history and local history’ (Pearson xvii). Secondly, just as a performance can be read from various perspectives, similarly, within a perspective, too, a performance can be studied from various sites (locations), with each having its own dynamics. The geographies of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh share some strong commonalities despite the distances. Both the place somewhere characterises what Williams describes as ‘a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation’ (1).

Despite rapid urbanization and forced displacement, India is still, primarily, a country of rural communities. According to the nation’s own official records, 70 percent of its population still lives in villages, of which 42 percent are below the poverty line and 10 per cent are landless labourers (*Census of India* 2001). Agricultural labourers, small

farmers and casual workers constitute the major section of the poor. Most of them constitute not only the lower class but also the lower-castes of the society. These facts are important in this study, as these are the contexts, in which the performance of cultural labour is enacted. The fieldwork has been mostly conducted in four districts of Bihar, namely, Patna, Nalanda, Vaishali and Jahanabad, as well as in the city of Hyderabad and its suburban areas in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh.

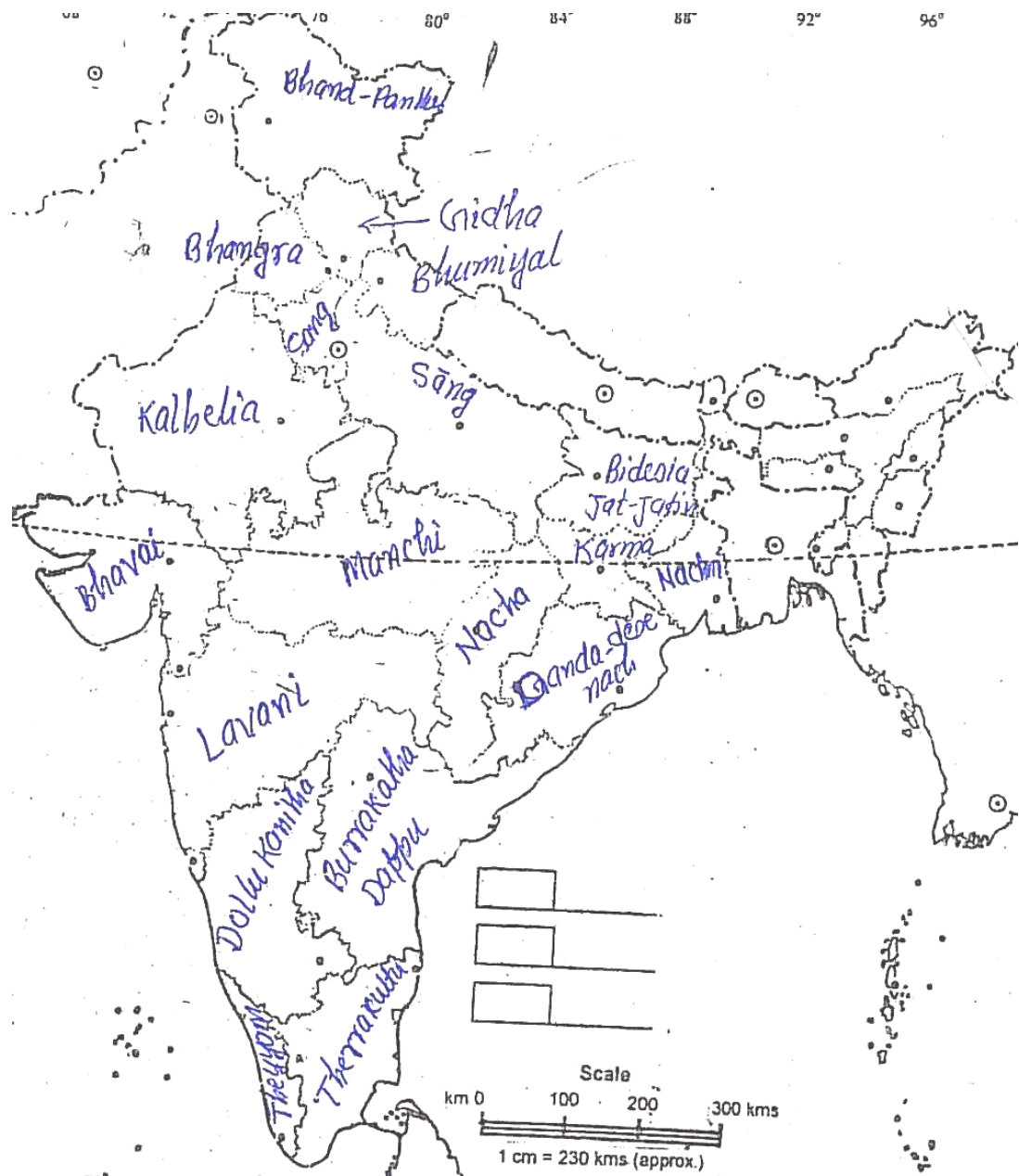


Figure 1.2: A rough map of the Popular Performances of Cultural Labour

At present, Bihar has the third largest population in the country and is the poorest state of India with a per capita income of 9,756 compared to India's 33,299. Around 74 percent of the population in Bihar depends upon agriculture and 43 percent of the total population lives below the poverty line (Indian States at a Glance 2008-09). From the colonial period to the present, Bihar continues to be the biggest supplier of the cheapest labourers across India. It also has the lowest rate of literacy in India. According to the 2001 census, the total literacy rate was 47 percent. Among the lower-caste communities, this percentage would not be more than 20 percent (*Census of India* 2001). Most of the lower-castes are engaged in agricultural work, with the Backward Castes as middle and small peasants and the Dalits as the landless agricultural labourers. Both small peasants and agricultural labourers seasonally migrate to cities as unskilled labourers. With the assertion of the lower-castes in the public sphere, the state witnessed brutal caste conflicts between the dominant and the lower-castes. More or less similar is the condition of the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh.

Due to the absence of a significant middle-class and under-development, the place continues to have a strong presence of pre-colonial cultural performances. However, many contemporary performances mark the shift from the traditional caste order (de Bruin *Kaṭṭaikkūttu* 146; Charsley & Kadekar 123). The process of modernisation and globalisation has also led to commercialisation and democratic politicization of these performances. While performances like *Yakṣagāna* and *Bidesiyā* went through successful commercialisation, the performance of *Bhūmī-pūjā* and *Reśma-Cuharmala* tried to maintain both their ritual meanings and contemporary political meanings. It is to be noted that there are other popular performance traditions that also exist in this region. They are *Dūgolā* (Duels), *Chāṭhī-Pūjā*, *Karmā*, *Cakwā-Cakaiyā*, *Jāt-Jāṭin* and *Domkac* and several genres specific to women. Most of these performances are going through a drastic change in terms of its production and reception, especially after the mass- mediation. Some new

performances have also been making their inroads. That includes Orchestra, Jagarnā and performances based on Television soap operas. It was believed that these performances are gradually going to marginalize and disappear, but the recent trends show that they are making a strong come back with the revival of local and regional identity.



Figure 1.2: Field shows the districts of the fieldwork in Bihar (Bihar District Map)

9. Performance Studies as a Methodological Approach

Performance becomes an interesting entry point for studying a culture (Bell 132). Milton Singer's argument that 'the performance becomes the elementary constituents of culture and the ultimate units of observation' makes a lot of sense when studying the performance of cultural labour (71). Even though culture and performance can be studied and performed in various ways, the best idea would be to study them from their own

bodies and contradictions, their own poetics and aesthetics and, most importantly, their own characteristics and framework. Therefore, performance becomes a key concept to work with and a lens to conceptualize. But this premise leads to an immediate question: ‘How that is to be done?’ (Kapur *Ramlila* 1). Hence, this thesis also becomes an examination of what is to be done and how that is to be done—a search for a conceptual framework appropriate for understanding such performances. Here, the performance of cultural labour works as a conceptual framework as well as a subject of study. While the nature of performance informs the methods, methods inform the conceptual framework.

Scholars from anthropology and various other disciplines have already demonstrated strong possibilities for a performance-centred approach in the study of folk culture. Abrahams’ context of performance (1968), Singer’s performance as a unit of observation (1972), Bauman’s performance-centred analysis (1986), Thiong’o’s performance-centric approach (1998) and Conquergood’s performative turn (2001) are a few examples. Seeing the importance of performance, Bauman believes that a performance-centred analysis offers ‘the fullness of the work in all its wholeness and indivisibility’ (114). Seeing the importance of performance Thiong’o also remarks:

So much in society depends on ‘performance’. It provides new insights into certain behaviours. It is central to so many things. [...]. Performance enables people to negotiate their way through the various realms of being. Performance is a means for people to realize their unknown, even if it’s only in the imagination. [...]. Performance is a concept that enables many things to be looked at differently [...]. There is a kind of performativity all around. (Thiong’o ‘Interview’ Cantalupo)

My justification for a performance-centred approach is further strengthened by the nature of Indian cultural performance, which is characterized by the centrality of

performance and a conspicuous absence of text-based culture. This is also important because the dominant literary approaches tend to ‘view texts in isolation from the conditions of their creation and performance’ (T. Mukherjee 2). Performance theory has also emerged as a new way of approaching south-Asian theatre, performance and culture. Recently, many scholars such as Afzal-Khan (2005), S.Chatterjee (2007), Dutt and Munsri (2010) and J.Menon (2012) have profoundly used a performance studies approach to examine south Asian cultures. By employing the lens of performance studies, the thesis tries to offer a new conceptual framework, appropriate for subject, to examine the field of research. Performance studies puts performance at the centre of social and cultural activities in order to understand some specific phenomena related to politics and aesthetics, but it is not necessarily limited to this. Based on ethnographic research, archival material and personal memory, this performance-centred approach indirectly emphasizes the four features of the performance of cultural labour: aesthetics/poetics, play, process, and power, as suggested by Conquergood in his study.¹⁶ For my performance studies approach, I will be using, particularly, Thiong’o’s postcolonial concept of performance and Conquergood’s conception of ‘performance as a radical intervention’ (with special emphasis on his four keywords: poetics, play, process and power), along with interdisciplinary and integrative approaches drawn from various subjects. By putting cultural performances of the Indian labouring lower-caste communities at the centre of investigation, this thesis examines cultural performance of perhaps one of the most oppressed communities in the world. My use of critical ethnography attempts to addresses what Madison asserts, ‘the process of unfairness or

¹⁶Conquergood (1989) suggested four key words in performance analysis. ‘Poetics’ foregrounds the creative and reflexive nature of language; ‘play’ emphasizes its experimental, improvisatory quality; ‘process’ stands to the ongoing, active unfolding of culture that can take place through performance; and ‘power’ reflects performance as a site of struggle where competing interests intersect and where dominant ideologies may be reproduced, reinforced, or resisted.

injustice within a particular *lived* domain’ for ‘emanicipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice’ (5)

Initially, while recording a performance during my fieldwork, I tried in vain to focus my camera on the stage and performers so that I could get a good recording. The reason for this was that many things were happening simultaneously and so even when I had my eyes on to the stage, I was unable to exclude those other elements from my sight. Another problem prevented me (and my camera) from focussing on one particular thing: I was not able to get to the right place from where I could see everything but was pushed away by jeering crowds and so my camera could only record a shudder. This incident reminds me of Anuradha Kapur’s remark that ‘theatre seeing is always perilous’ (25). Kapur noted that during the seeing of a performance:

It may happen that the crowd edges you out or that you lose your wits and your sense of direction in the rush, or that you are simply unable to find a reasonable place and therefore have to sit at the very back from where the actors are mere brilliant specks and are mostly inaudible. You learn to accept, however, that all things considered, these trials are not impediments in the process of seeing but are the very stuff of the *Līlā*; for wherever you happen to be, you see some aspects of the performance because the worlds of devotion, worship, business and theatre interpenetrate.

(*Ramlila* 25)

Not being able to properly watch and record performances did occasionally lead me to frustration and a sense of failure, but that failure brought forth a method. I kept moving with the camera during performances. Gradually, I learnt to keep my camera rolling and not focus only on one thing. I decided to keep my eyes on the movement and the linkages and montages, which keep occurring during the performance event. I think

that only a performance studies approach can explain my actions. In addition, the performance writings of many scholars, for example, have also mentioned such difficulties in studying a performance and culture. Thiong'o points out:

The problem with the study of cultures, no matter from what academic centre, is how to study them in their movement and linkages to other processes in that society and community. It is like studying a river in its very movement that is in its very being as a river. (*Moving the Centre* 27)

The point is to study a river one has to be within the movement of the river, so as to feel that movement and the power of the currents. In this thesis, my priority has been to study the performance of cultural labour through linkages. Rather than focussing only on performance 'as a context-specific event,' I pursue what Conquergood calls 'performance as a lens and method for conducting research' ('Moral act' 82). I have attempted to explore the meaning of this performance in a particular cultural context by positioning myself in the process of research. Along with theoretical analysis, I present a performance script in the form of live commentary, which may give a sense of what S. Chatterjee refers to as 'performance-studies-as-ingested-in-performance' (202). Commentary here refers to a frame-by-frame description of the performances as well as the study, evaluation and interpretation of those frames. This provides the information necessary for what Ramanujan (1989) calls a 'context sensitive society' ('Indian Way'). Commentary as a tool has provided a scope to capture the montage of performance. Following Conquergood, I have studied the performance of cultural labour as (1) an object of study; (2) a model and method and (3) an alternative space of struggle ('Poetics' 318).

When I started this project, I disliked both archival research and ethnography for different reasons. While the archives gave me an image of the *Vedas* (the treasure of knowledge which does not contain 'other' knowledge and gives access and outlook from

its own hegemonic perspective), I disliked ethnography and anthropology for their ‘ethnocentric’ aspects. The very thought of them brought to my mind all those images of the barbarous, savage, primitive, pre-modern and cultural ‘others’. Although I found some solace in performance studies, I could also sense the neo-colonial and imperialist nature of its scholarship (S. Chatterjee ‘Foregone ‘Conclusion’’ 2007; Reinelt ‘Is Performance Studies Imperialist?’ 2007). During the course of this study, I came across two radical performance studies perspectives, developed by Conquergood and Thiong’o, that have proved useful and engaging for this study along with other postcolonial writings. Marxist and Dalit-*Bahujan* perspectives also inform my approach.

In the process of writing this thesis, I have tried to maintain three methodological approaches that I think strongly resonates the approach of a performance studies. Firstly, in this entire process of writing the thesis, my methodology has become eclectic in nature, being informed by both a performance studies approach and my uneven interdisciplinary and cross-cultural educational background (literature, aesthetics, social sciences, visual and performing arts and theatre studies) in three different cultures and languages. While my initial idea to use performative writing: a form of writing which is not just writing about a performance, [but] that itself strives to be a performance, somehow failed, I did end up incorporating some levels of performative writing (Pollock *A Student’s Guide* 12). Thirdly, the methodological approach I have taken is fundamentally different from interdisciplinary and intercultural studies in the sense that it does not take performance as ‘inter’ but rather imagines performance in the centre. Following Conquergood, my methodology, instead of pinning down concepts, attempts to explore ‘the unfolding voices, nuances and intonations of performed meaning’ (Conquergood ‘Moral Act’ 83).

Conquergood’s conception of a performance as a moral act also helped me in maintaining an ethical position. He discusses four major sins that ethnographers commit. First is the strong attraction towards the other, coupled with extreme detachment, which

results in acquisitiveness instead of genuine inquiry, in plunder more than performance. Second is the distinctiveness of the other that is glossed over by a glaze of generalities. Third is the fascination with the exotic, primitive and culturally remote culture. Fourth is, instead of facing up to the moral ambiguities of performing culturally sensitive materials, like the sceptic, with chilling aloofness, flatly declaring, 'I am neither black nor female: I will not perform the Color Purple' (6-7). I agree with Conquergood's emphasis on performance as a moral and ethical act for ethnographers as well as with his idea of 'dialogical performance': 'a performative stance which struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another' ('Moral Act' 9). However, I have also felt that this dialogical performance has limitations in a society, which is full of unequal exchanges. Therefore, beyond the moral ethics for ethnographers that 'one should not say something which others find inappropriate,' I would prefer what Reinelt describes as 'political correctness' ('The Political Correctness' 142) and which can at times go against culturally inflected moral and ethical practices. Political correctness is also a practice of self-reflection, accepting and correcting mistakes and 'shifting back through reflections,' of finding critical strategies to revisit, rethink, rearrange, reconceptualise or recover as a means to renew the scholarship for a greater dialogue (Gilbert qtd. in Aston 1). Given its vast area and diverse nature, this field is still lacking in terms of a full-length study and a proper conceptualization of folk culture and performance. This thesis is a step towards bridging that gap. Instead of providing a simplistic binary between folk (subaltern) and dominant culture, I suggest that we understand these performances in a complex manner that can give what Geertz would call a 'thick description' ('the minute meaning and the rich language through which people act, think and feel') (25). At the same time, through the study of these cultural performances, I shall comment on and problematize the ongoing discourse of performance studies.

This study is important not only because these performances have not been studied and are undervalued in contemporary discourses, but because it gives new insights and understanding to the field. Besides being a documentation of oppressed-communities' cultures, the performance of cultural labour is also an exploration of culture and performance developed from the perspectives and contradictions of the labouring lower-caste communities. Broadly, the performance of cultural labour as a thesis is an exploration of the language of representation that goes beyond the middle-class normative language of theatre and representation (Chapter III). It is an attempt to understand performance beyond the performance event in terms of the landscape (Chapter II), beyond the pre-political act and the 'pure-political' act of subalternism (Chapter IV), beyond the culture of resistance and beyond the 'rehearsals for revolution' (Chapter V).

10. Limitations of the Study

To understand what I claim in this thesis is to understand exactly what I am not claiming. First, I am not claiming that Indian folk performance can only be read as the paradigmatic performance of cultural labour. I do not say that the performances discussed are the only types of performances where cultural labour exists. On the other hand, I am not saying that the performance of cultural labour represents all forms of folk performance and their characteristics and contradictions. Nor am I saying that the performances of cultural labour are strictly lower-caste or caste-based performances. What I am claiming in this thesis are some of the major trends in Indian folk performances, which have largely remained undervalued. The thesis is an attempt to insert these performances into the contemporary discourses. The study is important not only because these performances have been neglected in contemporary discourses but more importantly because they provide alternative and new discourses, which can help to democratize the field and make it more inclusive.

One of the major limitations of this thesis is that gender is not satisfactorily addressed, although I am well aware of the discourses around which gender questions revolve. Gender in theatrical representations has been recently discussed by many scholars (see Subramanyam 2002, Dutt and Munshi 2010, Bhatia 2010, Rege 2002,), but despite my efforts to accommodate gender, this aspect remains a missing link due to the very nature of subject-based ethnography. Most of the performances I discuss are outdoor performances, largely but not exclusively performed and attended by the males in the villages. On many occasions, women are completely absent and their voices remain unheard. The situation becomes more complex, in a gender-segregated society, for a male researcher doing fieldwork to get in close proximity to women. Not properly understanding Telugu language was the other major limitation in my research.

11. Project and Relationship

In the study of any living traditions of performance, there is no substitute for ethnographic fieldwork. Although this project is based on nine to ten months of fieldwork, it is also a reflection of my long-term association with the field. The fieldwork was conducted in my home region of Bihar, where I was born and spent 20 years of my life with the same communities that I am now studying. Therefore, at times, this study reflects what Pocock calls ‘personal anthropology’. According to Pocock, people, simply by being members of a particular society, already have some ideas, whether explicit or implicit, about how society works (viii). Even when I left my village to pursue further education in Delhi, I maintained a strong relationship with my family and friends back home. For me, my community works as nostalgia as well as a base camp (resource centre), where I always tend to retreat for connecting theories, creative endeavours and explanations. Alasdair MacIntyre’s statement fits well in describing my ‘self’:

The self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the tribe. Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving towards from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal consists. (MacIntyre qtd. in Conquergood 'Moral Act'1)

At the same time, my experiences outside of that society and all the academic training have taught me not only to detach myself in order to see things more clearly but also that 'detachment arises from one's own attachment' (Thiong'o Interview 2004). The initial idea for this project came to my mind a long time ago when, in the year 2000, as a student of tourism, I did a short project on the *Nāṭ* community (a traditional performing community). At that time, I recorded some songs and stories of the *Nāṭs*. That project prompted my interest in my own community's culture and I started observing some of the performances. In the meantime, I joined Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi where I became very active in leftist politics. Soon I landed in a street theatre group, which from time to time provoked me to go to 'the cultural self'. I had lessons in the politics of culture and got the opportunity to watch the revolutionary artist Gaddar's performances when he came to Delhi. It was during that time, while working as a part-time journalist in a Hindi newspaper, I wrote a few articles on these performances. The association further deepened when, after finishing my Bachelor's degree, I joined an MA course in Performing Arts at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in the same university. As a part of the course, I wrote some assignments on these performances. For my master's thesis in Taiwan, I did a comparative study of Indian and Chinese theatre aesthetics and some of the intriguing questions begged me to go back to the field. The project is further shaped by my own involvement in politics and culture as an activist and artist. My activism

helped me in taking clear position and ‘exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives’ (Michelle Fine qtd. in Madison 6).

12. Chapters Introduction

The thesis consists of five long chapters that deal with different aspects of the performances of cultural labour. The chapters draw connection in terms of larger discourses and conceptual framework.

Chapter I, Introduction: Performing Cultural Labour foregrounds a conceptual framework for Indian folk performances in the context of cultural labour. Using the synthesis of social sciences, cultural studies and artistic factors, I have used the approaches of performance studies to establish a conceptual framework that broadly encapsulates these performances. The thesis argues that Indian folk performances in the majority of the cases are viewed from inappropriate perspectives, for instance, using western realism to judge Indian folk performance, or the middle-class’s representation of the ‘actress’ to judge the representation of a lower-caste ‘performing woman’. Therefore, it needs to be examined from its own characteristics and contradictions.

Chapter II examines the landscape of the performance of cultural labour through a ritual performance, the *Bhūmi-pūjā*, a land worship ceremony. The *Bhūmi-pūjā* is a shamanic performance in which a spirit enters the body of a shaman who performs along with the *manariyās* (drummers) while praising the land and ancestors. It studies the landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* in the light of mnemonic memory of the performances of cultural labour. Landscape is about lived experiences, it is place in which ‘we first lived and learned to see’ (Williams 84). While the chapter highlights the subversive nature of this performance, it also discusses the dark side of such spirit-worship.

Chapter III examines the materiality of the performance of cultural labour through the performance of contemporary *Bidesiyā*, which is a theatre dedicated to migrant

labourers in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh region. The performance was created in the backdrop of the migrations caused by colonialism. I discuss the politics and aesthetics of migration, obscenity, jokes and satires as well as the politics and art of female impersonation, which are very much embedded in the materiality of cultural labour.

Chapter IV explores the movement of genre and identity in the performance of cultural labour. It tells the love story of Reshma, the daughter of an upper-caste feudal landlord and Chuharmal, a cowherd and Dalit warrior. This chapter argues for the need to go beyond the usual subaltern-elite paradigm. The chapter discusses how an oppressed caste uses all possible performance strategies and symbols, from subversive to regressive, in order to overcome its social marginality. The chapter not only shows the paradoxical nature of lower-caste identity but also reveals the paradoxical nature of performance. This chapter attempts to study the performance of a lower-caste identity along the lines of the performances of class (Willis 1977), ethnicity (Moerman 1974) and gender (Butler 1990).

Chapter V breaks away from the caste-identity based performance. For instance, JNM artists, despite coming from labouring sections of society, perform not only about their individual subjectivities, but also about their community 'self' bearing a common objective. The chapter examines the labouring bodies in political performance. I argue how the intervention of labouring bodies in political performances has radicalized the language and aesthetics of political theatre. The chapter examines the performance of cultural labour through the performances of Gaddar and the *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* (JNM). Gaddar and JNM's approach shows the revolutionary embodiment of oppressed subjectivities and the integration of folk genres emerging out from cultural labour.

CHAPTER II

DRUMMING THE LAND: THE LANDSCAPE OF *BHŪMI-PŪJĀ* PERFORMANCE IN BIHAR

1. Introduction

Landscape is always a work in progress. To perceive it, is always to carry out acts of memory and remembrance, engaging constantly with an environment within which the past is embedded. Landscape is not ‘written on’ by human action: histories are woven into the surface. (Pearson 201)

The performances of cultural labour cannot be extracted from their landscape. This inextricable link to landscape differentiates the performance of cultural labour from the other ‘similar’ performances, for example, from the institutionalized folk theatre. As Mike Pearson (2006) has rightly suggested, one needs to go through the acts of memory and remembrance and try to engage with the environment in the process of perceiving the landscape. Landscape is not just a piece of land it is rather a ‘set of relationship with the land’ and ‘a nexus of inhabitation, place and value’ (Pearson and Shanks 37-39). Using this method, this chapter attempts to analyse the landscape of performance of cultural labour by particularly explicating the landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance in Bihar.

Bhūmi-pūjā (literary, ‘the land-worship celebration’) is performed by almost all the so-called lower-castes and the Adivasi communities across India with different names. The fundamental traits of lower-caste *Bhūmi-pūjā* performances are the celebration of material culture (i.e., land, labour and ancestor) and materiality embedded in immaterial culture (i.e., the spirits). In this cultural performance, human activities get ‘incorporated’ within a landscape (Pearson xxv). The landscape becomes a field of interactions or what Pearson and Shanks say, ‘a palimpsest’ marked by actions:

The notion circumscribe that area where we feel we belong [...], the immediate neighbourhood, the window through which we view the world, a personal construct of land, language, history. The site of familiarity and identification. Where scenery is not separate from the lives there. Where the minutiae of morphology and tradition are preserved in idiom, dialect, proverb, lore. Where history is experienced as contemporaneous and the past still operates on the present. A ground level experience, landscape not as scenery but as a social construct, a palimpsest, marked and named by the actions of ancestors [*sic*]. (139)

In this chapter, I have analysed the landscape of cultural labour through the performance of *Bhūmi-pūjā*, which not only presents but also embodies the creative and material life of the labouring lower-caste communities. This landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* is not necessarily the representative of all the performances of cultural labour. This landscape nevertheless reveals some of the major features that can define the landscape of the performances of cultural labour. The landscape of the performances of cultural labour presents a complex system of relations of social and material forces in the context of time and cultural geography. I have used Mike Pearson's notion of landscape, which is haptic, performative and continuously evolving to examine this landscape. For Pearson, landscape is not something to be looked at but something to be lived, a unity of people and environment in 'complex integration of nature and culture'. In fact, this interpenetrative notion of landscape allows Pearson to argue that,

Performance as an active agent in engagement with place, helping make sense of the multiplicity of meanings that resonates from landscapes and memories; providing a mechanism for enacting the intimate connection between personal biography, social identities

and the biography of a place – at a variety of scales of rhetoric,
within different scales of landscape. (Pearson xxx)

Pearson further argues that if performance produces place by leaving its traces in mind and on the land itself, this is because landscape is always already performed (2006). This shows an attempt to reveal the multiple layers of physical, historical and personal experiences embedded in folk performance by performing its landscape.

Bhūmi-pūjā is a shamanic possession in which the community ancestor and the animal in the form of spirits enter the shaman's body and the shaman (known as *bhagat* or *bhagait* in local language, the one who drives away the obstacles) functions as a bridge between the ancestor and the community. In caste-based Indian society, most of the Indian lower-castes have their own ancestral caste spirits and deities who symbolically function as one of the guiding forces for their community.¹⁷ These spirits are known as *deva* (benevolent spirits) and *preta* (malevolent spirits). According to Romila Thapar, 'the *pretas* are considered as lesser category of the spirits, whose spirits may still be hovering among the living and who have to appeased and set to rest by a series of ceremonies' ('Death and the Hero' 687). However, it is 'the malevolent spirits that give moral authority, as well as an embedded political voice and a ritual means for political action to the lower-castes' in this landscape (Mines 5). They also function as a real source of power and as a creative source of alternative discourses in village relations (Mines 2005). Similar forms of spirit worship can be found across India, as well as other regions of South and Southeast Asia (Blackburn *Singing* 217). Since such spirits are symbolic and interpersonal, they are innumerable, generative and performative.

But how does the *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance fit into the performance studies perspective? I have primarily two reasons to justify: first, *Bhūmi-pūjā* has all the

¹⁷ In the Bihar region, *Khāje-khidhar* is performed by *Mallāh* (boatmen) and lower-caste Muslim women (as *rojā* of *Khāje-khidhar*), *Phekudyāl* by *Kānu* (Extremely Backward Castes [EBCs]), *Badan Baba* by *Telīs* (edible oil makers), *Manśaram* and *Līladom* by the *Doms* (scavenger caste) and *Dīna* and *Bhadri* by the *Musahars* (untouchable agricultural labourers).

fundamental features to be studied through a performance studies perspective, namely, centrality of performance, poetic language and landscape, importance of improvisation, display of bodies and being a performance tradition of marginalized communities. But *Bhūmī-pūjā* also has some broader connections. First, as Pearson argues, such landscape is always performed. Second, as understood through this performance studies approach, the subject does not remain a subject to be viewed; rather, through performance, the performer becomes capable of viewing the viewer. Thus, the performer as well as the viewer both becomes agentive players *in* and *through* the performance. They not only view each other and are viewed by each other, but view together another viewer (i.e., the spirit of the ancestor) who is supposed to view all of them. The performance process creates a microcosm of viewing. To illustrate my point, the audience, who are also the observers, view the *bhagat* (shaman) and *manariyās* (performers) performing, in addition to viewing each other. The *manariyās* (performers) view the *bhagat* performing and the observers performing; at the same time, also watching themselves perform. The case is similar with the *bhagat*. All of them are alongside supposedly to be viewed by another viewer whom the observers are capable of viewing only through the act of shamanism. Even I, as a researcher, view and am viewed by the participants. Almost all the participants become active and agentive players in this process of viewing, even though they may have different perspectives. The perspective itself becomes performative. Thus, for all these reasons, *Bhūmī-pūjā* becomes an appropriate subject for performance studies. *Bhūmī-pūjā* is about performance and landscape, biography and locality, memory and place (Pearson xvii). These are the pertinent questions in performance studies discourse.

A question that now becomes relevant is what has happened to the upper-caste spirit world. It appears that in the construction of the hegemonic social structure, which reciprocally produces the performances of cultural labour, not only did the upper-castes get separated from labour and the lower-castes but also the 'upper-caste spirits were

separated from the rest’ of the lower-caste spirit world (G. Prakash 220). In upper-caste rituals and beliefs, the ancestral spirits were elevated to the status of Sanskritic gods and goddesses (Kosambi 1962; Thapar 1989; G.Prakash 2003). As a result, we are only left with the lower-caste spirits or Adivasi spirit deities.¹⁸ In this regard, Kosambi (1962) noted that the religious observances of the various social groups in India, especially of the lower-castes, show roughly the order in which the particular groups were enrolled into a production relationship. While the lower-caste spirits and deities still [to an extent] symbolize the direct or indirect relationship with the labour and production relationship in which the lower-castes are involved. Even if some upper-castes still worship ancestors, the practice is increasingly disappearing. The practice is also disappearing among the lower-caste groups, who are ever more moving out of the *Jajmānī* system. This has also happened as a part of ‘the disintegration of an entire universe of social relations of which it [spirit belief] was constitutive’ (Bourdieu *Language* 302).

2. Landscape of ‘Undefined’ Performance

Problems of Naming

Bhūmi-pūjā is also known as *dharatī-pūjā* (worship of mother earth), *mānar-pūjā* (drum worship), *manariyā ka khelā* (play of the drummers), *bhagat khelā* (play of the shaman), *gahabar-pūjā* (worshiping space), *preta-khelā* (play of the spirits) and various other such names. Omprakash Valmiki in his acclaimed Dalit autobiography, *Jūthan*, has given a vivid account of such deities, their worship and their distinct characteristics with respect to hegemonic Hindu deities:

These deities are worshipped in every house. They are different from Hindu deities, and their names won’t be found in any

¹⁸ The traces of spirit worship among the upper-castes can still be found in many of their ceremonies. For instance, every year, many upper-caste Hindus go to Gaya to offer *pindās* (mounds of clay) to their ancestral spirits. This is a most visible sign of spirit worship among the upper-castes (G. Prakash 217).

Purāṇa, even if one searches hard. But go to any family of our clan and you will find these deities worshipped. Whether it is a birth, a wedding, or a feast for the dead, nothing can be accomplished without worshipping these deities. (Valmiki 29-30)

Valmiki's account exemplifies the significance of such deities among the lower-castes. While some of these deities are commonly worshipped by the lower-castes, each house also has its own deity. Naming the deities is difficult because they are either nameless or have different names. Grouping them is also complex because they belong to different genders, age groups and caste groups; are of different nature (some are benevolent, others malevolent), are associated with different villages and represent different aspects of land, labour and ancestral and ideological relationships. Their places of worship may be both at homes as well as in the outskirts of villages, generally in the form of mounds of clay called *thān* (e.g., *Maiyā-thān* referring to mounds of mother goddess or *Maiyā*); although sometimes there may be no such places of worship at all. Sometimes we may find a few statues, mostly in terracotta, or wall paintings of their ancestor spirits being worshipped during the *Bhūmi-pūjā* celebration. In most of these images, they are headless (*Chinnamastikā*), beheaded (*Murkatwā*), fallen headed (*Chuharmal*), red eyed (*Maiyā*) and with mouth full of blood, bones and caricatures (*Ichākī*), signifying *vīra* (valour) and *krodha* (anger) *rasās*. At one level, the image expresses the internalization of violence.

The images represent, what Bakhtin has termed, the 'grotesque image' which not only displays the outward but also the inner self of the creators (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 318). The images are certainly products of a violent and oppressed society. Mines (2005) is right in terming them fierce gods, 'who, through their social disordering powers, turn the table on domination and assert their own powerful alternatives of village relations' (5). But the question is—fierce for whom? Shiva Prakash observes that the deities considered

benevolent by lower-castes and tribal communities were identified with demons by upper-caste Hindus (*Traditional Theatres* 3). He mentions *Bhūtārādhane* of the exploited backward caste communities of Kannada region, Karnataka, where the spirits of heroic men and women, who have sacrificed their lives for the community, are worshipped (Shiva Prakash *Traditional Theatres* 4-5). In Karnataka, these deities are called *Bhutās*.¹⁹ Wendy Doniger's study of female sexuality (1995) has divided such goddesses into two categories, 'dominated goddess of the breast' and 'dominating goddess of the tooth' or 'genitals' (90-91). While the first represents the upper-caste Sanskritized goddess, the second falls under the lower-caste folk deities. These divisions are full of fluidity but their hierarchical power relationship cannot be ignored. The naming process shows that every claimant has his or her own way and interest of naming.

Similarly, people have several names for *Bhūmi-pūjā*. For the *manariyās*, the performance is *mānar-pūjā* (drum worship); for the organizer, ancestor worship; for one set of worshippers, it may be *darshana* (devotion); for others, it is just a *khelā* (a play of significance). The worship can be organized on a big scale with fifty-two pairs of *mānars* (drums) and a big communal festivity; medium scale with just a few pairs of *mānars* and limited festivity and small level without *mānars* and the festivity restricted to just a few community singers narrating the story of the ancestors.²⁰ Moreover, both males and females can play the role of the *bhagatai* (shaman). Males generally play the male spirit and females the female spirit, as long as they are chosen by the ancestor to play the role. The aim to perform *Bhūmi-pūjā*, like most of the traditional ritualistic performances, is 'to bring about peace, to celebrate life and nature, to seal contracts, to give spiritual assurance, to guide from one stage of life to another, to domesticate excesses of aggression and lust through symbolic substitution' (Neelands and Goode 85). Such

¹⁹According to Shivaprakash, the word, *Bhūtas* stands today in Indian languages for ghosts or demons, but the Tulu for it is *bhūth*, which means god (Shivaprakash 5).

²⁰Apparently, one should not use fifty-two pairs of *mānars*. It is believed that the ancestors tried but failed.

diverse kinds of aims, names and practices make it difficult to give the performance a single name. The naming of a lower-caste performance is less about the description or inscription of performance and more about the incorporation and embodiment. To get an indication as to how local community use different names for this purpose; let us look at the following three conversations:

Q1: Where were you, son?

A: Father, I was watching *Bhuiyān bābā ke pūjā* (worship of the ancestor *Bhuiyān*).

Q2: Hello uncle, what is that sound?

B: You don't know, *Rama Shao* is offering *pūjā* to *Phekudyāl*.

Q3: What is happening there?

B: *Bhagat* is playing.

C: *Bhagat* is directing the play.

D: *Bhagat* is being directed by the ancestral spirit to perform.

E: *Manariyās* are performing or the ancestor is going to be offered *mānar* (drums), or simply, *mānar-pūjā* (drum-worship).

Bhūmi-pūjā or *Gahabar-pūjā* is the most common name used across castes and regions in Bihar. In our scholarship, naming becomes important, not just for the sake of naming and performance, but also because of what Bourdieu calls the 'social operations of naming' (*Language* 105). Since we are not only looking for performance as an analysis but 'as a way of knowing' (Taylor xvi), therefore, while naming, at a deeper level, we must examine 'the part played by words in the construction of social reality' (Bourdieu *Language* 105). I argue that, compared to other terms, the name *Bhūmi-pūjā* or *Bhuiyān-pūjā* (the worship of land, labour and ancestor), fits this performance the most.

Beyond Event and Script

Thinking a performance as an event and an event as a performance, I was waiting for an event to study the performance of *Bhūmi-pūjā*. Fortunately, I visited my village after the harvest, which is a season of events all around. And, finally, on 23 June 2010, in the afternoon, at around 2:30 p.m., as my *tuk-tuk* (a means of transport in villages) was passing through a village near mine, I heard the sound of drums. I got down there to explore what it was all about: followed the drumbeats and reached a space where *Bhūmi-pūjā* was being performed. I entered the courtyard of the patron's house and saw a gathering of *manariyā*, accomplished singers, drummers and narrators, besides a few villagers. The empty space outside the house had been changed into a performance stage. The *bhagat* had not yet come; so, in the meantime, the *manariyās* decided to sing a song. They started with a *sumiran* (invocation):

Haa...Haaa... Haaaaaaaa... Haaaaaaaa

We²¹ invoke this soil (where we perform) and Mother Earth

Who is everything for us...Haaaaaaaa

Then we invoke the protection of my mother

From whose womb we all are born...Haaaaaaaa

Then we invoke the *Dihvar* (village deity)

Who protect and give shelter to all of us...haaaaaaaaa

Then we invoke *Maiyā Chaṭhi* and *Dinānath* [Sun deities]

Whose light burns all the daylong...haaaaaaaaa

Then we invoke Mother Ganges

Who is our *pālanhar* (one who takes care of all)...haaaaaaaaa

Then we invoke our Guru...haaaaaaaaa

²¹In Bihari languages (referring to the languages of Bihar), 'I' as a singular pronoun does not exist. 'I' (*main*) is always pronounced as 'we' (*ham*) but *ham* connotes both 'I' and 'we'. Therefore, here 'we invoke' can be also read as 'I invoke'. Bihari languages are cluster of three main languages and dialects: Bhojpuri, Maithali, and Magahi, spoken along with Hindi and Urdu in Bihar and its neighbouring states.

That Guru who gave us knowledge...haaaaaaaa

Then we invoke *Pancho-pir*²² and other Muslim deities...haaaaaaaa

Who sacrificed their lives like the real warriors...haaaaaaaa

Then we invoke all our society members (*sakal-samāj ke*)

Without whose presence we can't perform...haaaaaaaa (Deva 200-202).²³

Then [...] Then [...] Then [...] [1]

Suddenly, the *manāriyas*' performance was interrupted by an old lady.²⁴ 'O Singers! Are you going to sing something or are you going to end the thing with your *sumiran*?' 'Are, *sumiran* is a formality. You've done it, now move ahead,' she complained. 'Old mother is getting angry,' a performer said to the other members. 'Fine, let's start the song of the ancestor *Ganinath* then,' the *manariyās* complied.²⁵ Song is very important here as song always travels. Song has a reciprocal relationship. Thomas has pointed out that,

To travel across such a landscape is to remember it into being, it is sedimented with human significance. And the pathways are song-lines, long narrative excursions which remember places in song. To travel the land is to sing the world into being again
(Thomas qtd. in Pearson and Shanks 135).

The song above is a piece of *sumiran* (invocation). Performers sing it before any such significant performance event. Many times *sumiran* (prayer) is not considered

²²*Pirs*, generally *Pancho-pir* (five warrior and saints), are worshipped by lower-caste Muslims as well as by lower-caste Hindus. These deities are worshipped as ancestors. Indian lower-caste Muslims also worship and believe in the local deities and shrines. Apparently, in India, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and almost all the religions have also developed a caste system within their religions like Hinduism. Also, the Indian lower-caste who converted to Islam and Christianity has maintained their early ancestor beliefs. For caste system among other religions, see the works of Imtiaz Ahmad (1975), Fuller (1976) and Jodhka (2002).

²³ Though a rough translation on this performance is available in Indra Dev's work, I had to change some of the contents as per my recordings.

²⁴*Manariyās* play the drums in performances of *Gahabar-pūjā*. They are accomplished singers, dancers and narrators who sing and perform about the ancestors and spirits.

²⁵*Ganinath* is an ancestor deity of the *Kānu* caste, one of the officially listed Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) in Bihar. Since this particular performance was organized by a *Kānu* caste family, *Ganinath* becomes an obvious choice to invoke. *Manariyā* understands these things well and they play accordingly.

significant enough or part of the performance event. It is ‘often omitted’ or shortened (Wadley 11). As a result, ethnographers in their writings also omit it or include it merely for formality. But it should be noted that *sumiran* is also known as *bandhan* (setting the boundary). Therefore, this is also the song, which sets the centre and boundary in a performance. It defines the event and sequences of occurrences. In Schechner’s performance language, it can be considered as a warm up, the background of ‘ordinaries’ from which ‘extraordinary features’ of a performance emerge (*Performance Theory* 11). However, in performance studies discourse, the term ‘warm-up’ only applies to actors, not to the structures of the performance. In that sense, *sumiran* encapsulates warm-up, preparation, regulations, as well as invocation. The *sumiran* quoted is indeed only a small portion. In other circumstances, it could have continued for an hour. According to performers, they carry a list of some hundred deities (the number varies) that they invoke; but they have hardly ever sung the entire song. The number signifies that these deities are innumerable and the list is improvisatory. If the invocation ends, the propitiation begins:

With what shall I propitiate *Dharti Maiya* [Mother Earth]? Aaaaaahaaaa

With what shall I propitiate [village deity] *Dihvar*? Aaaaaahaaaa

With what shall I propitiate my mother? Aaaaaahaaaa

With what shall I propitiate *Pancho-pīr* [Muslim deities]? Aaaahaaaa

With fire sacrifice I will propitiate Mother Earth...haaaaaaaa

With whole grain I will propitiate the *Dihvar*....haaaaaaaa

With folded-handed I will propitiate my mother...haaaaaaaa

With a cock, I will propitiate *Pancho Pir*...haaaaaaaa. (Deva 201) [2]

After attending several *sumirans*, I observed that performers do not follow any sequence: as to which deity comes first and so on. Even though it is commonly believed that performers follow a particular sequence, in which some deities are invoked first and others later. In a similar way, it is believed that the song of *Bhūmi-pūjā* follows the given

sequence: *sumiran*, song dedicated to mother deities, song dedicated to male deities, song dedicated to the river and nature deities, song dedicated to the animal and birds and finally the *samgardā* (miscellaneous songs) (Ram *Bhāo-bhagait* 42). But this again seems to be a fallacy: ‘It’s simple. Whoever comes into your mind, invoke them. They all are equal,’ a *manariyā* claimed. In fact, whenever the *manariyā* comes across some new deity, they add them to their existing list; if they forget someone, they excuse themselves at the end of the song. This shows the non-scriptability and undefined nature of *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance in particular and the landscape of the performances of cultural labour in general. It is to be noted that such performances themselves are embodied within a landscape. In other words, landscape becomes a performance through one can read the performance of cultural labour. Such a belief denies hierarchies of deities, which have become authoritative and scripted in the institutionalized religion and beliefs.

Landscape of Religion and Superstition

Earlier, some studies (e.g., Moffat 1979; Dumont 1980) have argued that the Indian lower-castes have no culture of their own, and instead, replicate the dominant social order within their communities. This perception also has to do with the undefined. However, on the other hand, the colonialists, Brahmanical Hindu culture and literary discourses all considered their rich culture, for example, land worship and ancestor worship celebration as ‘superstitious’ and full of irrational beliefs. This already had severe repercussions on the community. Ancestor worship compared to other religious and cultural activities is denigrated to such an extent that even new members of the community after getting educated try to distance themselves from this ancestral wasteland. In this caste-colonized culture, Freire’s comment becomes appropriate:

The colonized is made to feel that their language and culture are inferior to the colonizers’ language and culture. The colonized are

made to turn against their own traditional background by making it seem uncivilized and savage. (Freire 200)

The past has been projected ‘as a wasteland which asks people to distance themselves from their own environment, and remove them from themselves’ (Thiong’o *Decolonizing* 3). One of the reasons for the growing Sanskritization of the lower-caste culture has been the lower-castes’ lack of belief in their own culture as well as their dissociation with it. In this context, it is important to mention that a clear-cut demarcation is drawn between religion and superstition. To clarify, let me narrate a story: I grew up in an environment where my community was fully involved in a similar kind of spirit worship. In school, and through textbooks, we were taught to get rid of superstitions. However, ‘superstition’ always meant lower-caste spirit beliefs or similar practices of totem, but definitely not institutionalised religion. Respect religion and stay clear of superstitions was the common lesson. As a result, not only did we, the ‘educated’, appreciate and worship upper-caste gods and goddesses, but also ridiculed and made fun of lower-caste beliefs, believing the former to be religion and the latter, superstition. I remember that this division was clear to us. One day Manusadeva or Manuṣayadeva, the family ancestor, possessed a very close cousin of mine. In lower-caste ‘spiritology’, this was a sign that the ancestor had chosen him to be a shaman. I was outraged that he had started practising what I then believed were superstitions. I criticized him. He at first listened, tried to convince me and finally reacted sharply by saying:

Do you think you are the wisest person of the community? Bear in mind that our community people are not foolish to continue these practices. You think that by going to school you have become smart enough to criticize our ancestor. You will understand the importance the day *Manusadeva*, the ancestor will possess you. You will understand its value later.

Then he walked away. I thought he was stupid enough to be trapped by the community. He, on the other hand, considered me too arrogant to understand the ancestral values. *Manusadeva*, the ancestor, to date has never possessed me. In the meantime, my cousin became a *bhagat* and I became a researcher. So, when I decided to study this performance, after ten or eleven years, in 2010, we met again. When I informed him that I was studying *Bhūmi-pūjā* in *Nandan* [London], he seemed a little concerned that maybe I would once again make fun of his beliefs and ancestral spirits. However, once I convinced him that I had no such intention; he concluded that *Manusadeva*, either the ancestor had possessed me or I must have dreamed of the ancestor. Otherwise, according to him, there could be no justifiable reason that a person who was so arrogant and dismissive about all these practices would reconsider looking at them empathetically. He was especially apprehensive regarding my place of study (London to him being a reminder of the colonial gaze). In fact, it was with surprise and a sense of cultural pride; he asked me, ‘by the way, what will the *gorā palṭan* (the White) teach you about our performance and ancestor beliefs in *Nandan*’ [London].²⁶

Perhaps he did not know about George A. Grierson, a *gorā palṭan*, who as a colonial tax collector not only collected taxes but also village gods, godheads and spirits in the Bihar region. In *Bihar Peasant Life*, he provided the list of around a hundred such village deities and spirits. Such a list of deities even the villagers may not be able to provide. The best *manariyā* too, who is supposed to be the best narrator of the entire area can only provide the list of some 50-60 deities. Indeed, no such list exists, since these spirits are generative and performative; and no local is ever bothered about such a list. Such lists only exist in colonial archives or in similar anthropological models, which see culture in cease. Depending on his upper-caste informers and incorporating upper-caste

²⁶*Gorā palṭan* literally means ‘white army’. Some people of this area, especially the elders, use the term *gorā palṭan* instead of *gorā* (white) to denote the British. This holds true for someone whose skin is white too. One can conclude that in their cultural memory, there are no whites without army.

beliefs into account, Grierson paraphrased the nature and characteristics of these deities, largely described as demoniac and anti-social in character. Not surprisingly, in this list, Chuhamal, the ancestor of *Dusādh* (Dalits) was listed as the first thief and most other lower-caste deities under the category of miscellaneous superstitions with demoniac characters (402-407). The grotesque image of the subversive act was turned into a pretext for new law. Thus, the very thief and the rebels celebrated as Robin Hood figures against the religious and ritual hegemony of the upper-castes were classified as criminals and anti-socials in the colonial history. This has also changed the meaning and character of the thief of that landscape, from a rebel figure to a de-notified tainted figure.

3. Landscape of Memory

In every home a crematorium

In every home a gallow

In every home are prison walls

Colliding against the walls

She falls. (Pandey *Band Khirakiyon Se Takrākar*) [3]

Gorakh Pandey, a revolutionary poet, wrote this poem against Indian patriarchy. Once when I was carrying its Hindi version, during my fieldwork, a curious young person started reading it. He asked me to explain its meaning to the people seated there. While I was explaining, a man in his 50s reacted, ‘Then the house must be full of *preta* [spirits of the women who died].’ ‘Why do you think that?’ I asked him. ‘Son, because so many women have died in the house,’ the man justified and asked me to read the next stanza. Perhaps, he was expecting a return of the spirits of the dead. Before I could begin, another person intervened, ‘*Aho* Uncle, they are educated, they don’t believe in *preta*. Dead is dead forever. It does not even matter whether you die young or old. Your death is natural or unnatural.’ It seems to me that in such a cultural landscape, whoever has fallen down

has to rise at least in ‘imagination’. Natural death is fine but unnatural, unjust death is unacceptable, and such death must be deified.

This deification of unnatural death among the lower-castes may not symbolize the politically conscious decision to protest against such unjust death, but it definitely shows a presence of resistance consciousness. In fact, the deification of death constitutes one of the major themes of the lower-caste spirit performances across India (Blackburn 1988; Mines 2005). If death is violent, the *preta* (the spirit) will be violent too. For instance, a godling named *Murkatwā* (a spirit of a lower-caste beheaded person) is worshipped by the *Musahar* caste (untouchable labourers) in the Gaya district of Bihar. In the imagination and memory of the *Musahars*, *Murkatwā* keeps avenging his death by beheading the community that had once beheaded him. Blackburn (1988) in his study similarly notes how a violated woman is transformed into a violent goddess (92). Moreover, such vengeance by the *preta* (spirit) in any form is not only accepted, but also justified by the community. Tuan argues that a land is a repository of memory and sustains hope (qtd. in Pearson xx). The landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* is embedded with memory. This landscape may not be realized in reality but becomes activated in their memory and imagination.

I remember an incident in my village in which a comparatively rich man had supposedly beaten his stepson to death. The whole community was shocked by the incident. He (the *preta*) will take revenge—the rumour was everywhere. For years, a number of people claimed to have seen his *preta* appear before them. In 2010, when the memory of the stepson has almost disappeared (what Roach calls ‘forgetting’), another son of the man, whom he loved very much, came under a ploughing tractor just after his marriage. Though the son was saved, everyone in the village, including the father unanimously believed that the *preta* of the stepson was taking revenge. The rumours were of the following kinds:

A: Though he [*preta*] had almost decided to kill him, even the *preta* felt pity.

B: Even his *preta* could not be as ruthless as his father.

C: He [*preta*] was not a coward like his father; he was a man of community.

A: He [*preta*] left him [the beloved son] because we in the community always loved him [the deity].

Such spontaneous interpretations say a great deal about the way memory and imagination are improvised to fit the emerging situations in the performance of cultural labour. Certainly, the interpretations would have been completely different had the son died. The people of the community subsequently asked the father to offer a big *pūjā*, a *pūjā* to the dead stepson whom he had allegedly murdered once. Two examples mentioned above also show the significance of studying a performance beyond and outside of the performance event. In the *Cities of the Dead*, Roach remarks:

Cities of the dead are primarily for the living. They exist not only as artefacts, such as cemeteries and commemorative landmarks, but also as behaviours. They endure, in other words, as occasion for memory and invention. (4)

Roach presents a remarkable analysis about memory and performance in the circum-Atlantic world—the cities of the dead. Can this analysis be extended to a world where cities or villages are not yet dead? The performance of cities of the dead and the villages of the living do not always stand in opposition. However, if the cities of the dead are for the living, then the villages of the living are for the dead. Unlike the cities of the dead, the villages of the living do not have cemeteries and commemorative landmarks; in fact, the worshipping mounds of *Bhūmi-pūjā* are washed in every rain and flood and recreated through community memory. In this way, while the mounds give an image to memory, which it preserves in the time of erasure, memory re-creates the mound for worship for a cultural continuity in the villages of the living. This shows, what Pearson

argues that if performance produces place by leaving its traces in mind and on the land itself, this is because landscape is always already performed.

Can we understand the cities of the dead in Indian performances without the villages of the living or dead? The dilemma of the cities of the dead cannot be explained without considering the villages of the living. This makes an interconnection between the cities of the dead and the cities of the living. One can but one should not only depend on the cities of the dead for cultural performance. Of course, when the cities of the living are turned into the cities of the dead then we will have no options except reconciliation or recuperation. Then, as Roach has shown one has to depend on the bit-pieces and memory and their endurance in cultural behaviour and museum.

Ephemerality/ Durability of Performance

Memory and performance have a reciprocal relationship in the performance of cultural labour. While memory works as an agent *for* and *in* performance, performance refreshes and brings that memory back to life. In this dialectical process of memory and performance, both continuously get a new lease of life. Memory denies the ephemerality of performance and performance disallows what I will call 'the archivity of memory'. One can then ask that if this is the case, then should not a memory continue forever. While it is so, the memory may not continue because it is equally carried out through what Roach calls 'the social process of forgetting' (*Cities of the Dead* xi). The social process of forgetting is not only actualized in actual forgetting but also in the process of reinventing and readjustment of the memory in a particular context. I have already given the examples of readjustment of memory and imagination when the person's son was found alive. Adding to this memory through performance always entails an improvisation. Improvisation is abundant but always selective in folk performance. For that reason, performance of memory always indicates a performance of selective and

improvised memory. On the one hand, this characteristic of Indian folk performance makes a performance always contemporary and up to date. On the other hand, this also becomes a survival strategy for the performance of cultural labour. In this regard, Pearson suggests a method of chorography to capture the more subjective dimension of ‘non-generalisable specificity and form’ of performance ‘in which genesis takes place’ (Ulmer qtd. in Pearson xxiii). Chorography does it by drawing together dispersed though discretely located memories’ (xxiii). By using this method, I analyse the genesis of memory and performance and their inter-relationship in the next section.

Performances like *Bhūmi-pūjā* is also born out of the need to nurture the souls of the ancestors and to maintain a tradition of remembrance (Thapar ‘Death and the Heroes’ 687). In *Bhūmi-pūjā*, memory is indirectly but not always responsible for the genesis of performance. The question is, why and how a performance is generated in *Bhūmi-pūjā*? Is it simply because one (e.g., *bhagat*) decides to perform and ‘display’? Indeed, in several spirit worships, like *Bhūmi-pūjā*, one is forced to perform and display even if a person does not want to do so. This is quite evident that nobody willingly invites *pretas* (dangerous spirits), even if they may be their ancestors or loving kids, who are dead. In my interactions with *bhagats* and other people who frequently get possessed by spirits, they told me that at least in the first instance they were afraid of such somatic encounters. But, according to them, when one becomes a shaman, then he or she learns how to control the energy; and the somatic movement becomes a conscious embodiment. Thus, the performance of *Bhūmi-pūjā* demands an understanding of the performance beyond display, in organic movement.

Memory is so powerful it has a schizophrenic effect. It does not only contain disorder but also discontent. Historically, the experience of the oppressed-castes is the experience of various social discontents, which is manifest in various forms. One of these is *preta* or the spirit of the dead. Carlson notes that the images of the dead continue to

work their power on the living (*The Haunted Stage* 1). This power comes through powerful (haunting) memory, which also involves strong body movements and becomes corporeal in nature. Unlike the individualized bourgeois memories, which only haunt the head; the haunting memories of the ‘dividual’ society also haunts both the body and the head. Gilbert and Tompkins maintain that the ‘spirit possession is generally manifested through vigorous physical movement/dance, producing a ‘force’ which is expressed in the tension maintained between control and frenzy’ (62). The force is a motion, which results in performance. In such a performance, the body and the mind have a corporeal association. Thus, when a memory haunts the head, it also moves the body.

At the same time, it is also true that not every experience becomes a memory. Memory is something that is always special: experiences of things that are very pleasant or poignant. When everyday experiences become naturalized, they may cease to be part of a memory, though they can become a part of the performance. Therefore, it is not only the historical memory that makes a performance but also the lived memory of everyday experiences. In India’s caste-based society, the voices of the dead somewhere also represent the voices of the living. In such shamanic performances, the dead not only speak on their own behalf but also on behalf of the living. They also offer lessons and strategies for the future. We can say that memory as the experience of the past speaks through the present, not only for the past but also for the present and the future. It seems to qualify the Bloch (1977) argument that presence of the past in the present is characteristic of ritual communication—the other system of cognition (287).

Imagination also plays an important role in such a performance. The performance offers a creative dimension to imagination. In a performance like *Bhūmi-pūjā*, performance and imagination together resist any idea of static and archaic assimilation. In the imagination of the oppressed-castes in India, the faces of their deities are constantly in flux. To explicate it, I would prefer examples from death because death provokes

reflection upon past and future, on memory and aspiration, genealogy and inheritance (Pearson 9). In that landscape, whoever dies an unnatural death or sacrifices their life for the community becomes the undeclared face of the ancestor and may replace the earlier one; in addition this also adds their personal name and narrative (subjective experience) to the pre-existing community narratives. Nothing holds for long in such performances—faces are in flux and narratives are in performance. I remember when one of my family members died in an accident (an unnatural death), he became *Manusadeva*, the family deity, until replaced by another member who died young; and though in between some old family members also died, they were not considered *Manusadeva*.

4. Distribution of Sensible on the Landscape

In Indian folk culture, notes Sumanta Banerjee, ‘the gods and goddesses are treated as ordinary mortals with human feelings like love and jealousy, gratitude and vengeance, lust and selfishness’ (*Parlour and the Streets* 82). In this landscape, the concept of deity is not metaphysical but much more metaphorical, that is, the metaphorical extension of real existing relationships. The relationship between the ancestors and their worship is familial and secular. The ancestors’ spirits generally possess family members. The spirits possess family members when the ancestor’s principles are violated: when they are not invited on special occasions and when they feel ignored by the family. Thus, implying that even though they are dead, their rights and spaces within the family have not ended. The ancestors seem to ask, ‘How can one disrespect and forget a good family member just because they are not seen anymore?’ Just like any family member (e.g., husband, wife and mother) would, the deities (ancestor spirits) complain of not being given proper care and love, not being worshipped regularly or remembered. An ancestor spirit, in a *Bhūmi-pūjā* I witnessed, complained, ‘you are drinking all the milk of the cow and isn’t it a shame that you don’t offer me any

(*rattibhar*)?’ In this context, Indra Deva has mentioned a song in which a deity is complaining to her worshippers that she is not being worshipped properly:

Chathī Maiyā spoke in great anger, ‘Listen O *Mahādeo*!’

On my abode weeds have grown and the spider has lodged itself

Mahādeo said laughing, ‘Listen O *Chathī Maiyā*

I shall get the weeds cleared and sprinkle sandal [be cool]. (207) [3]

However, it is not only the deity, who can complain, the worshippers can complain too. Since the relationship is interpersonal, family members and worshippers can complain uninhibitedly. There are several songs through which worshippers complain directly or by using the shaman as a representative. During such performances, comments like ‘why should I worship you?’ and ‘what have you given me?’ are quite common. Deva notes a performance song by women in which they express their anger against the indifferent attitude of such deities. The song, which I have heard in my region, is:

Had I known, O deity, that you would become so indifferent

I would have searched another court

Had I served a stone, O deity, it would have softened

But you remain hard-hearted

The cloves and cardamoms, O deity, have been damaged by the weevils

The kid who I kept has become old

O deity, may fire catch your enclosure

May lighting strike your abode (Deva 207) [4]

Many times people also make fun of the deities. In a *Pacharā* song, the deity is, jokingly addressed as ‘my sister who puts obstacles’ (Deva 208). This democratic worldview of the deity, which is generally defined in terms of religion and sacredness, can also be exemplified: whenever my mother gets angry with the deity, for whatever reason, she shouts and questions the deity without any hesitation. The democratic and

familial relationship with the deity can be further explained through the following familiar proverb, in which the deities are condemned:

The *Dhobī* (washerman caste) is better than the *Kāyastha*,²⁷

the Thug (petty thief)

Better than the *Sonāra* (goldsmith)

The Dog is better than *Deotā* (deity), the Jackal

Better than the *Pandit* (Brahmin). (Deva 270)

What do these examples mean? How do we understand this concept of the lower orders' beliefs? These images and deities cannot be understood though, and thus should not be put under, the institutionalized category of religion and sacredness or secularism. Such religion asks the deities 'to put heart and luck into the labour' (Caudwell 12). But, unlike what Caudwell argues, magic does not cease with the division of labour. Rather, magic ceases in the classes, which cut their link with direct production. Unlike the institutionalized rituals of the dominant caste, which are based on an institutionalized religion (many times on texts), the *Bhūmi-pūjā* is not institutionalized in that sense.

5. Performance on the Landscape

Landscape of Pre-performance

In the afternoon of 10 August 2010, a man handed an invitation card over to me. It was an unusual occurrence in that particular period, as it was neither the marriage season nor was there any news of a death, especially of an old person (those are the two occasions when such invitation cards are in order). As surprising as it seemed, it was for a *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance. Two major events of the *Bhūmi-pūjā* (*Jagarnā* and the actual *pūjā*) were mentioned on the card along with the name of the patron and the family members. I had never seen a printed card for *Bhūmi-pūjā* before. During my school days,

²⁷*Kāyastha* falls under the upper-caste category whose traditional occupation was scribal and literature.

when I was in the village, the *Nāi* or *Hazām* (barber caste) used to orally inform us about such events. Later some people started sending handwritten letters as invitations. This shows how *Bhūmi-pūjā* has incorporated new materials in performance.

Bhūmi-pūjā observance is generally divided by people into two major events: (1) *Jagarna* (a call to stay awake), which is organized one day before the *pūjā* and (2) the *Pūjā* (the actual worship and celebration). However, in terms of structure, the celebration of *Bhūmi-pūjā* can be divided into four major events: (1) *Jagarnā*, (2) *Chauhaddī* (procession; setting up boundaries and the centre), (3) celebration and possession, and finally, (4) distribution of *prāsād* (food from or of the ancestors).

***Jagarnā* (a Call to Stay Awake)**

When a *jagarnā* takes place at someone's house in a village, some people are formally informed, some get to know through their interactions with other people and some come to know after the drumbeating by the *manāriyas*. For one such *jagarnā* event at my neighbour's house, my mother was informed. As I was at home and she knows that her son is writing something about this celebration, she informed me too. My mother explained to me that *Jagarnā* refers to staying awake through the night. At times, she thinks that I am becoming an outsider and I do not know or care for many things of the community. But this time she felt happy about my study. She sees my study of local culture as my homecoming, becoming an insider again. While for outsiders, I was always an insider. An insider may not think in that way. But if insiders accept a researcher as an insider, then is not it a big compliment for the researcher?

Around 8:30 p.m., I heard *manariyā* singing and the sound of drumbeats.²⁸ I put my camera, notebook and pencil in a bag and ran towards the worshipping place. However, when I arrived, nobody was there except a few family members and children. I

²⁸ The observation is based on the incident and performance of a *Bhūmi-pūjā* on 20 Dec. 2010.

then realised that what I had heard earlier over the loudspeaker was actually a live recording of *Bhūmi-pūjā*. While family members were discussing their family matters, children were imitating the *bhagat* (shaman) and *manariyā*. ‘Ha-ha, son did you get confused by the cassette songs?’ a family member laughingly asked. ‘Yes, uncle,’ I replied in embarrassment. He laughed again and said, ‘you know many times I also get confused with this recorded song of *Bhūmi-pūjā*. One cannot tell the difference unless one does see it.’ I was relieved: it was not only me who was getting confused with such things. The tension of being an insider and outsider, being an insider and becoming an outsider, and balancing of both has accompanied me on the landscape. I have been unable to resolve how much of an insider and how much an outsider I actually am.

‘Come and have a seat, *Jagarnā* will start soon,’ a family member said. ‘*Bhagatji* and *manariyā* have gone for the [ritual] bath in the river [Ganges]. They must be coming back,’ said another. I took my seat. As we were discussing, the sound of the drumbeats was getting louder and louder. At first I could not see but only sensed that, the *manariyā* were almost near. Then I could see them dancing, singing and beating the drums. While the shaman and a few other people were following the *mānars*, one person with a bowl of fire and another with a gaslight were leading them in the dark night. A small crowd of old and young, men and women, began to gather outside the house of the patron. They had come to observe *Jagarnā*. They are the observers who had come to make an observance. In other words, everyone is an observer here; everyone has come to a performance, which is basically an observance. On this basis, Shivaprakash calls such ritual as an observance (‘Key-note’ ISTR 2011). He differentiates between observance and performance. According to him, ‘While people attend observance to observe a ritual or celebration; people go to performance primarily for entertainment’ (‘Key-note’). Seeing the diversity of performance genres and considering Shivaprakash’s consideration, one can say that

observance is a kind of performance, which is not for the purpose of entertainment but for some greater communitarian goals.

Let us come back to *Jagarnā*, which is organized a day before the *Bhūmi-pūjā* ceremony. It can be considered as a full rehearsal for the *pūjā*. It should not be confused with a ‘warm up’, because it does not have an immediate continuity to the *pūjā*. It also provides training for new singers who can sing the whole night and can keep the tradition alive. In fact, within a few minutes, during that *Jagarnā* the number of observers grew to more than a hundred. The *bhagat* was sitting near the fire. And the *manariyās* were performing—singing, drumming, dancing and cracking jokes. The *manariyās* had sung so many songs that by now the *bhagat* should have become possessed. I was surprised too. The *manariyās* and the *bhagat* tried again; but there seemed no sign of any connection. I was reminded of James Cameron’s movie *Avatar*: either the tower or radar had some problem or maybe the plug was missing. The *bhagat* tried, he failed again and could not connect with the spirit world. The community people present were getting worried. The *manariyās* were feeling helpless the *bhagat* was tense.

I have observed several such performances but this had never happened before. In fact, prior to this, I never thought that connecting to the spirits was such a serious business. I was of the view that the *bhagat* just pulls off a drama, some kind of psychological game. The shaman’s family members were getting more worried especially his old mother and younger brother. Then the elders started giving suggestions: ‘throw all your anger and obstacles from your mind,’ suggested his ageing mother. ‘*Bhagatji* [Dear shaman]! It seems you are getting old, you don’t have that courage and vitality to carry the spirit of our ancestors,’ an elder tried to provoke the shaman; perhaps thinking that provocation might work for the performance. ‘Hey don’t comment like that, don’t try to be wise, don’t force the ancestor to get angry,’ another elder rebuked the first one for his provocation. One of the *manariyās* asked the *bhagat*, ‘What has happened to you?’ A

tensed *bhagat* suggested, ‘You people sing and drum with full energy and you people,’ he told the audience, ‘don’t make unnecessary noise.’ *Manariyās* followed and so did the audience. The tense *bhagat* wrapped his *dhoti* (wrapper) around his body and tried to concentrate on the fire of the burning cow dung. In a few minutes the tense *bhagat* transformed into an angry spirit. His body was shaking, his voice trembling.’ If we did not have these young and energetic *manariās* (drummers), you might not have played,’ an elder said to the *bhagat*.

The *bhagat*’s was a full on and vigorous performance. His body was trembling. He was supported by his younger brother and other community members. As the sound of drums and cymbals grew, a few community people queued up with their problems. Soon, the shaman transformed into a healer. He was addressing their problems: relating to diseases, animals, harvest, jobs and relationship. *Bhagat* addressed all of them with a promise that if the wish were fulfilled, the person would perform *Bhūmi-pūjā*. The *Jagarna* ended with distribution of *prasādi* (sugar-cubes). It was almost 11:00 p.m. Yet the observers were returning to the *pūjā*. Community singers were making space to sing the whole night. They would use the loudspeaker too. When I was a student, I used to get irritated by the loudspeaker. But as nobody registers any complaint in such cases, I didn’t either. In fact, I am convinced that most of them enjoy the loud sounds. ‘Isn’t it always good to listen to the songs of the ancestors? Even if you do not understand the narrative, you will get the good fortune,’ argued an elderly member whenever I protested.

As the community singers were preparing, some bad news arrived. We came to know about a young boy of the community who had died in a road accident in Allahabad city while working as a migrant labourer. The elders gathered again. The matter was discussed. The *pūjā*, scheduled for the next day, was cancelled because of this unexpected death. ‘Perhaps this was the reason that the shaman was not getting possessed today; it

might have been an omen,' a young woman commented. 'Yes, it is possible that the young boy as *preta* was stopping the shaman from performing,' others supported her.

The day after the *jagarnā*, the family members and relatives wake up early in the morning and preparation for the *pūjā*. Elder members of the family were given the responsibility of preparing *gahabar* [the worshiping place]. *Gahabar* shows the material projection of the ancestor's heritage and belongings. The *laṭhī* (stick), sword, stone-grinder and other material-belongings of the ancestor were put on display. Women, along with some male members, made *prasādi* (food for or from ancestors).

Manariyās woke up and immediately after freshening up started singing and drumming again.²⁹ Most of them belonged to the *Chamār* caste, some are *Dusādhs* and a few to the caste *Banpad* (fisherman caste). All of them were untouchables (Dalits) and belonged to the lowest rung of the Indian caste-based society. Across India, drummers in such worships commonly belong to the same caste-class. Among people, they are known by their profession—*manariyās* (drummers). In a traditional set up, they are professional drummers who also charge a certain amount of money (e.g., for this entire event, 800 rupees per pair was charged). Most of them are agricultural labourers who do not own their own land and depend simultaneously on many occupations for their livelihood. In their day-to-day lives, their people are not only harassed by the upper-castes but also by the dominant middle castes or even the caste that is above them in hierarchy.

However, during *Bhūmī-pūjā*, the *manariyā* are often treated like family members, singers of the same clan. This particular *pūjā* was organized by a dominant Backward Caste of the region, *Yādava* (Milkman caste). In the daily activities, *Yādavas* and other backward castes mistreat these untouchable castes. But as *Bhūmī-pūjā* is a special day, they are called by their proper names, with respect, like Upendar *bhai* or *bhaiya* (brother Upendar) or *manariyā bhaiya* (brother *manariyā*); not abused by using their caste names

²⁹ This observation is based on the performance of a *Bhūmī-pūjā* on 25 Dec. 2010.

(*Chamra, Dusdha*). They can on this day, freely go to the ancestral worshipping places. They help in preparing *gahabar* (the worshipping place). Some women even consult ‘brother’ *manariyās* to get some magico-religious treatment. Isn’t there something strange in a society in which caste persists as a marker of every act? I have been wondering for some time whether I get manipulated in a ‘cultural performance’, in what Milton Singer calls the units of observation. Milton Singer identified the unit of observation as cultural performance, which include play, concerts, lectures also prayers, rituals readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things, which we usually classify under ritual and religion rather than with culture (61). In Singer’s view, the units of cognition [*episteme*] are not units of observation [*cultural performance*] (60-61). But if we attempt to understand the landscape of a culture, then we need to find some methods based on that unit of observation to explore the epistemic or cognitive aspect of that culture. The unit of cognition, many times, may not reflect the unit of observation but in such a society, which does not have archives like the cities of the dead; the unit of observation becomes the source that can give some views on the unit of cognition.

To grasp the unit of observation in a critical way to reach to the unit of cognition, provocation as a tool of performance studies can help us in finding out that epistemic and cognitive aspect of a cultural performance. To provoke, I played a typically ‘casteist’ role. In a discussion with an old person, I asked, ‘But don’t you think these *manariyās* are untouchables? They are behaving as if they are the priests.’ The person replied:

In fact, they are the priests today. They are the other shamans.

They are not considered untouchable in the space of *Bhūmi-pūjā*.

But during the *Navrātra* and *Saraswati-pūjā* (festival of the religiously institutionalized gods and goddesses), we do not allow them inside our houses. In *Bhūmi-pūjā*, they are everything. No great *pūjā* can be successful without *manariyās*. Today our and

their ancestors come together. *Manariyās* should not get hurt today. The ancestor will not feel good, they will be angry. In fact, *manariyās* have power like *bhagats*, who usually belong to the caste who organizes this observance.³⁰

He then mentioned an incident in which a *manariyā* had even challenged a *bhagat*. The *bhagat* thought himself to be powerful and tried to subdue the *manariyā*, but finally he himself became subdued by the power of *anurāga* (melodic song) of the *manariyā*'s melodic drum (Bhagirath Rai Personal Interview 22-24 Oct. 2010). The shaman gets evoked by the singer and drummers. But, what do *manariyās* think about their special treatment on the day of the *Bhūmī-pūjā*? One *manariyā* leader said in response, 'Like the upper-caste worship cannot be held without Brahmin priests, the lower-caste spirit worship cannot be successful without *manariyās*.' The ritual placement of *manariyās* in *Bhūmī-pūjā* gives them the power to negotiate and assert, however it also reinforces a certain relationship. The relationship also highlights the priestly role played by the dominant lower-castes.

By the afternoon (around 12 p.m.), everything was almost ready for the *Bhūmī-pūjā*. It was time for the long and big procession. But, as it was a hot summer's day, the community members decided to postpone it to 2 p.m. Around 2 p.m., the procession started. Shamans, *manariyās*, family members, relatives and the community people all became part of the procession. The *manariyās* were leading the procession, followed by the family members and women singers. Whenever the *manariyās* stopped to perform, the space became circular. They were encircled by the village people and the people in the procession. Then they started moving towards the river Ganges for a ritual bath, which was around four kilometres from the house.

³⁰ Based on the observance and discussion with patrons and performers on 25 Dec. 2010.

The procession started from the observer's inner house, with the *manariyās* and others singing the song of family ancestors and inviting them for the day's *pūjā*. The procession is about setting up the centre and boundaries. It is an invitation for all deities and spirits for the day's worship. It does not matter whether they are benevolent or malevolent spirits. *Manariyās* and women who were singing and performing kept switching their songs from one spirit to another as they passed through different locations. Villagers stood in rows and watched the procession as it passed through the marked spaces. For the upper-castes of the same villages, the lower-caste spirit in performance is not welcome. Thus, *Bhūmi-pūjā* becomes an undesirable act for the upper-castes, an act to be avoided and not to be observed. In particular, the upper-caste women are not allowed to watch such performances by their male counterparts in a very feudal set up.

'You know the upper-castes think that under the possession of the spirit, their women may lose their modesty and do *nangā nāc* (naked dance).' I laughed when a lower-caste woman who also practices shamanism told me this. 'But that's true to an extent! Under possession you don't have control on your body and language. You just move with the spirit—the strong force. Things come naturally,' she explained. 'Aunty, then why do the lower-caste men and women do not do the *nangā nāch* (nude dance) after getting possessed?' I asked jokingly. 'Many times they do, you might not have seen.' She cited examples of some incidents in which spirit possession turned into an 'obscene' act.

'Of course, when it comes to the upper-caste women, their desires are more controlled than our women and they can create a big fuss,' she said.

So, she was of the view that possession may have a greater infliction on upper-caste women but this does not mean that it does not have any on the lower-castes. If upper-caste women could lose their modesty under the possession then there is a similar fear that the upper-caste men could lose their social dignity, constitutive of their caste status after participating in such performance. Additionally, in a patriarchal society where

a woman's body must be controlled, a woman's body in an act of shamanism is more or less dangerous to both sides.

Finally, after reaching the banks of the river, the shaman, his wife and some of the family members took a bath in the river. The shaman and all the members of *manariyās* were offered yellow *dhotīs* (ritual clothes). The shaman's wife, who was also a practising shaman, was offered a new sari by the family members. The *manariyās* under the leadership of shaman invoked *Gangā Maiyā* and ask her for blessings for the family and the communities. Thereafter, the procession moved to all *pindās* (mounds of the soil), that are situated in the periphery, outside of the village. They are usually invoked, performed and invited to *gahabar* (the worshipping place).

Moreover, with intense spirit power, the entire landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* becomes a magnetic field of tensions and conflicts during the performance. The landscape becomes a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives (Pearson and Shanks 134). In this light, the centre and periphery of the landscape becomes important. That is, how centre and periphery can be conceptualized in the performance of *Bhūmi-pūjā*. Before the *Bhūmi-pūjā* event, there was no such centre. Almost all deities were part of the peripheries like the very peripheral location of the lower-castes. However, for the purposes of the *pūjā*, a momentary centre is created. It is a centre that does not hold permanently. This centre moves to the peripheries and asks those peripheries to come to the centre. In this process, all known peripheries or margins are performed. Then all the peripheries will move to the centre for a performance where the centre will be performed. The concept of centre and periphery in *Bhūmi-pūjā* is an *in* and *out* concept unlike the fixed centre and periphery. This exemplifies what Thiong'o says about orature:

Orature assumes a dynamic interplay of margins and centres so
that one could come to wonder about which was margin and

which the centre. Orature in this sense could even be seen as rejecting the formal boundaries [...] (Thiong'o *Penpoints* 115).

Though in ghettoised and gender-segregated Indian society, *Bhūmi-pūjā* as an orature cannot be performed so freely but still it imagines that strong possibility of interplays. After setting up the boundaries and inviting all those ancestral spirits, the procession came back to the worshipping place. By this time, the *bhagat* had incorporated several spirits. He trembled and fell down as the spirits kept coming from all around. He was supported by a person. His head was shaking and his other body movements were becoming more vigorous. Perhaps, he put himself in 'the state of disequilibrium' and then tried to regain the balance (Barba qtd. in Schechner *Performance Theory* xviii). It seemed like the shaman was trying to find a balance. He was then given a betel nut to chew. Suddenly, a mischievous smile spread across his face. He seemed to have found the balance of his body and voice in the rhythm of the drums. He smiled again and started to play with the rhythm of his body and the rhythm of the *mānars* (drums). In this manner, both (rhythm of body and drum) are synchronizing and becoming one. In the beginning, it was the shaman who was following the *manariyās*, later both took turns in leading and following. It seemed to me that the balance of rhythm had been found because I could see that the rhythm and movement were not only becoming more melodic but also complementing each other. They were performing on the rhythm of the *bābā ho, bābā ho, bābā ho [...] maiyā ge, maiyā ge, hage maiyā, hage maiyā hage maiyā*. Huge numbers of community people turned up to observe the celebration. Following the same rhythm, the *bhagat* and the *manariyās* made several cyclical movements around the *gahabar*. After making a few circles, the shaman stopped and the main event of the *pūjā* was performed.

In the mean time, some people had already started queuing up with their problems and wishes. I remember that during my childhood my mother would always ask me to stand in the queue. However, when this time she asked me, an idea came to me: I wanted

to make some participatory observations. But I felt it unethical. How could I stand in the queue if I did not believe in occult? I decided not to participate.

The *pūjā* ended with slogans of *Dhartī Maiyā kī jay*, *Bhuiyān Bābā kī jay* (Hail mother earth, Hail the ancestor *Bhuiyān bābā*). It was the time for *prasādī* distribution (distribution of the ancestors' offering). But, people started fighting for the *prasādī*. Some of the *prasādī* had already been stolen from the *Prasādī-ghar* (space where the offering is stored). Family members accused the villagers of looting and disrupting the *prasādī* distribution. Villagers completely denied the charges. 'So how was the *pūjā*, did everything go well?' a villager asked a friend while we were crossing the river by boat. 'The *pūjā* celebration was really great! But I must say that this is a strange village. You know, people started looting *prasādī* as if they were hungry for days. They almost disrupted the food distribution. It was really disgusting,' my friend replied and I supported his concern. 'Hahaha...*aho padhal* (hello educated)! [*Indicating us*] So you think that people have looted the *prasādī* because they were hungry. It is not like that. Indeed looting, stealing, quarrelling, fighting and lying for the *prasādī* show your love and affection for the ancestors. Otherwise, who will eat that tasteless *khīr* and *liṭṭī* which neither have sugar nor salt,' said the elder person, who was also crossing the river with us. The person claimed that when the ancestors were like us, they also used to do the same thing. 'We all did that at a certain point of time,' he laughingly told us. In fact, our sense of civilization was being laughed at by the lower-caste villagers in the boat. My view was viewed (observed) and, as an 'insider', I felt as an outsider again. It was a performance of inside out and outside in. My insider position was challenged and I had to negotiate my position and strategies throughout the fieldwork.

6. Poetics and Aesthetics of the Landscape

The poetics and aesthetics of landscape of *Bhūmi-pūjā* are characterized by its organic and integral nature of creativity. It constitutes a unified field of genres, arts, actors and their relations with land. Due to its integrative and organic nature, the language of *Bhūmi-pūjā* is as much grounded by the poetics as by the aesthetics. For example, the language of *Bhūmi-pūjā* does not only have a simple flexible grammatical pattern (poetics) but also a musical pattern (aesthetics) and bodily movements. The musical pattern has arisen out of the rhythm of a body in a historically and culturally structured production relationship. In this regard, Kosambi argues that caste works as a class at primitive level of production relationship. Therefore, we can see that every caste has its own artistic rhythm of the labour they are involved in. Though *Bhūmi-pūjā* is based on the reflexive nature of language, it follows a selective musical pattern (Vatuk 1978). The pattern can be termed as a 'formula' of the oral formulaic theory. The oral-formulaic theory seeks to explain two related issues as why and how does a performer improvise poetry and why orally improvised poetry has the characteristics it does. In oral formulaic theory, formula is a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea. In a *Bhūmi-pūjā* song, the song has to primarily follow the formula of the rhythm and musical pattern. While the bodily movement gives the rhythm, this rhythm develops into a musical pattern and performance. At times, folk singers are unable to sing without the music tune. They usually forget the song and they can only remember it again with the musical pattern. Similarly, it becomes difficult for them to give music without words. This characterizes the embedded aesthetics of word, music, body and space in the *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance.

Moreover, in a caste-based society, caste as a culturally defined group functions as a cultural repertoire. This is the reason that each caste has created its own rhythmic language, song, musical pattern and even musical instruments across India. In Bihar, if

the *dhobī* (washermen) have their *dhobiā-nāc*, then the *Kahārs* have their *kahār-nāc*. If the *Yādavas* are happy with their *Birhā*, then the *Musahars* feel proud in singing the song of *Dīna-Bhadri*. The cultural and performance repertoire of the lower-castes not only tell the story of atrocities and oppression alone, but also their struggles as well as creative imagination. The performance of the lower-caste spirit worship has endured because of the fixity of the division of labour. The fixity of a community on the basis of caste over time resulted in the shaping of distinct languages and cultures for each caste group. Kancha Ilaiah has noted that ‘every caste has built a treasure house of its own knowledge and vocabulary’ (*Why I am Not a Hindu* 6). This has further resulted in the making of their special consciousness. On this basis, we can say that cultural performances like a language based on caste are not only about social communication, but also about the expression of that particular historical consciousness through a performance.

One of the main challenges the field of performance studies is facing is how a researcher can enter into the very creative body of an artistic genre and performer. One approach could be practice-based research through performance (e.g., I would have to practise shamanism, which I think is ethically wrong). A second approach, which has not been given proper attention, is self-creative engagement with that artistic genre in a creative collaboration or as a comparative method acknowledging the nuances.

Using the second approach, I have attempted to understand the creative process of *Bhūmi-pūjā* through my own experiences in the artistic process. I have experience of writing both lyrical poetry (song) and other forms of poetry. In reference to this, Muktibodh, a significant Hindi poet and scholar, has pointed out that the creative process in lyrical songs (*gey kāvya*) is quite different from the poetry, which is merely a reflection of mental and intellectual reactions (78). In the case of songs and lyrical poetry, I want to capture the imagination not only in writing but also through my body and actions. When I write the latter, I feel the urge to move. In fact, I want to move with the rhythm of the

imagination. As the imagination possesses (inspires) me, I want to move much faster, many times more vigorously, to keep pace with my thinking and imagination. At that moment, words flow rather easily and visuals create a landscape. My body wants to compete with my imagination and thought. I can feel the gap between my thought and body and it is frustrating. I have no doubt that if I could capture my imagination through my body, if I could move with that imagination and rhythms, then (I think) I would have been more or less like a shaman. In a shaman, I can see a whole poet, a complete artist.

The shaman's performance even in a ghettoised society represents the core values of that poetry and aesthetics which is not yet so much alienated from their creative and productive process. Since shamanism is an integrative performance, it is not necessary that the mind will always lead the body. The body remains a creative force, so the body can also lead the imagination. Gradually, towards the height of possession, the body and imagination work dialectically in a rhythm which results in the synthesis of both body and imagination and, finally, the achievement of a balanced rhythm. Moreover, *preta* is not merely a spirit, it is indeed a body. *Preta* cannot be realized without the body; in fact, *preta* is realized in and through the movement of body and rhythm of labour.

7. Dark Side of the Landscape

If ancestral spirit worship like *Bhūmi-pūjā* gives lower-castes a power to assert and emancipate themselves, then on occasions, it can also reinforce the subjugation through ritualized oppression. Meena Kandasamy has reported:

Lalpari Devi, a 45-year-old Dalit woman was accused of being a witch by caste-Hindu, feudal villagers in Bihar who mercilessly beat her up, paraded her through the streets, tied her to a palm tree, cut her hair and smeared her face with limestone paste. She

was saved from certain death by the timely arrival of the police.

(‘Dangerous Dalit Women’)

Kandasamy further quotes government official data, which estimates that around 2,556 women were branded as witches and killed in India between 1987 and 2003. From 1991 to 2000, over 522 cases of witch-hunting have been registered in Bihar. In the same decade, about 300 people were put to death in the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh on the suspicion that they were practising black magic. Witch-hunting along with many other kinds of the socio-political and economic exploitation is commonly practised on the pretext of such land ritual worship.

G. Prakash’s study of bonded labour in the Gaya district of Bihar (1996) shows the way in which lower-caste spirits were appropriated by the upper-castes to serve their particular interests. He notes that the ‘ritual practices associated with spirit cults not only bore the imprint of the caste hierarchy but also became instruments for articulating and securing social hierarchy’ (Prakash 216). By subordinating spirit cults of the lower-castes, ‘the Hindu landlords reproduced the caste hierarchy’ (Prakash 216). Mencher’s (1982) study into sorcery in Travancore reveals the way social control over the excesses of the high-caste landlords was exercised through the thread of Pulaya black magic. Likewise, Raheja’s study on ritual practices of *dāna* (ritual gift) exposes the way *dāna* works as an ideological device to maintain the upper-caste dominance over the lower-castes (48).

There are several examples in which the upper-castes have systematically exploited the lower-caste rituals to continue their domination. In some other cases, when the lower-caste spirits are appropriated to serve the Hindu canon, they are subsumed as subservient to the latter. However, one can claim that these are all accounts of the upper-castes’ atrocities on the subaltern lower-castes, which have nothing to do with the dark side of the spirit worship. But it can also happen in different way.

On International Women's Day 2011, a woman was physically tortured by the people of her community for practising witchcraft (*BBC Hindi News*). On 21 March 2011, a son killed his mother on the suspicion of being a witch. The dark side of the spirit worship also prevails more strongly among the lower-castes and most notoriously among the Adivasis. Again, women are an easy target. In these societies, spirit cults are also used by the powerful and dominant within a family, society and community to prosecute the weaker. The question is how should we understand this dark side of spirit worship and its complexities? I would like to ascribe some of these complexities to the symbolic and material changes, which are taking place in the world of representation.

One of the most noticeable changes that I have observed in recent years is the sharp decline of the figures of *maiya* (mother deities) and malevolent deities. Such deities are acknowledged, but are increasingly being replaced by the male and more benevolent deities. Until recently, in *Bhūmi-pūjā*, *Dharti Maiyā* (the mother earth) was the main deity and *Bhuiyān bābā* (the ancestor Bhuiyān) was her worshipper. At present, the major role and power has been attributed to *Bhuiyān bābā* (a male ancestral deity). *Bhuiyān bābā* is increasingly becoming powerful. Similarly, *Sūraj Devtā* (the Sun god) replaces *Chaṭhī Maiyā* (the Sun goddess). In this retrogressive development, the mother, *Chaṭhī Maiyā*, has become a worshipper of her son, *Sūraj Devtā*. Besides this, some of these deities and spirits are gradually being appropriated within the institutionalized Hindu pantheon. In this appropriation, the lower-caste deities end up becoming subservient to dominant upper-caste deities. From G.Prakash's study (1996), we can draw that by subordinating the lower-caste deities, the dominant castes subordinates the lower-caste's social agency, which is in a way attributed to their deities. It has also been observed that spirit possessions by women are going down in number. It is to be noted that *Maiyās* are not disappearing because of any 'modern' and 'rational' values. *Maiyā* is disappearing because some hegemonic gods and their subservient goddesses are coming. All these are

signs of rising patriarchal values in lower-caste society and growing hegemonic Brahminical and patriarchal culture in the Indian society as a whole. Therefore, it is not strange that Brahminical values are being revived in through the performatives of subalterns, for example, through some *Birhā* songs. For example, a *Birhā* laments the present degenerating age through caste-biased remarks:

O Rāma, the pigs pollute the water of Gangā
 The *Chamārs* (untouchables) have become devotees;
 On the holy basil rosary of Rāma's own hand,
 The *Kalwar* counts Rāma Rāma. (Deva 249)

8. Conclusion

Am I rationalizing the irrational and superstitious beliefs of the Indian lower-caste community? Do you think *gahabar-pūjā* is religion or superstition, art or craft, magic or science? Does a cultural performance have any scientific explanation? These questions always perturb me. However, the fundamental question does not rest in the question itself, rather, it rests in the performance of the question, in which performers ridicule others for worshipping spirit deities ignoring that they themselves have raised these deities to its systematic forms of religion. Thus, I argue that the politics of rationality becomes more important than the very question of rationality. This politics of rationality should not be confused with the multiplicity of reason and rationality. Rather it somewhere denotes the performance of rationality: the way in which even the performers who do not claim to be rational use rationality.

I believe that such mnemonic performances of cultural labour will keep haunting the field of culture and performance studies, as they are the sources of energy and the archives of community memories. Thus, in future, *preta* may not come to us through ritual but through 'ritual aesthetics' (Neelands and Goode [2005] 2009).

CHAPTER III

MATERIALITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL LABOUR: CONTEMPORARY *BIDESIYĀ* IN BIHAR

1. Introduction

Dear mothers and sisters! Young and old! Lovely naughty children! There will be a *tamāśā* of *Bidesiyā* today. What is this *tamāśā* of *Bidesiyā*? People come from faraway places to watch our play. And they say: ‘Let’s go to watch the dance of *Bidesiyā*.’ Hey! This is not just a dance. This is a *tamāśā* [*a complete theatrical entertainment*]. This *tamāśā* will have four characters: *Bidesī* (the Migrant), *Pyārī Sundarī* (the Beautiful Lover), *Baṭohī* (the Traveller) and *Rakhelin* or *Raṇḍī* (the Prostitute).³¹

The *Labār* (joker who is also a narrator) announces the play and introduces the characters. The stage is ready; the lights are on. The actors are gearing up in the green room; the crowd is waiting outside. The musicians have already tuned up their instruments; the audience claps and the *tamāśā* of *Bidesiyā* begins.

Bidesiyā, also known as the *Launḍā-nāc*, is one of the most popular theatrical performances from Bihar-Uttar Pradesh region in Eastern India.³² *Bidesiyā* means a migrant or one who resides in *bides* or *videś* (foreign land/other land) for livelihood. The term is used for migrant labourers by the people who were left behind (Majumder 12). It has strong socio-economic connotations depicting its relationship with labour and the trauma of indentured migration. In local languages, it ‘contains elements both of love and complaints for leaving the loved one behind’ (Narayan ‘Bidesia’ 12). *Bidesiyā* connotes several meanings in the cultural context of Bihar (N. Singh ‘A Common Heritage of

³¹ This narrative is based on the performance of a Saryug Bidesia Party on 16 July 2008.

³² The term *Launḍā-nāc* stands for the dance of the female impersonators. *Nāc*, *nācni* or *nācā* is the term commonly used for the most of the popular performances in the Hindi speaking region. The performance involves at least music and dance in their performance.

Pain'). *Bidesiyā* refers to a migrant, connotes the culture of the migrants, stands for folk culture (*Bidesiyā loka-sanskriti*), is a folk song genre, is a theme of folk painting and is also a famous play (of the same name: *Bidesiyā*) by Bhikhari Thakur, which narrates the story of a migrant's family. The success and popularity of the play *Bidesiyā* resulted in the naming of the performance genre itself as *Bidesiyā*. *Bidesiyā* can be translated as the 'theatre of the migrants' or the 'theatre of the indentured labourers'. But unlike the 'theatre of migrants' described by Bharucha in intercultural performance practices where 'migrants do not define themselves with their points of origin, but with their ceaseless movement from one place to another' (*Theatre and the World* 54). In the case of *Bidesiyā*, the migrants strongly characterise themselves from their 'points of origin' even as they go from one place to another.³³

Bidesiyā is a blend of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, of dance, songs, music, love, labour, jokes and obscenity. The *Bidesiyā* artists borrow freely from existing performance genres ranging from caste-based songs, women's songs, labour songs and devotional songs to popular film songs and music. Scholars like Susan Seizer (2005) and S. Chatterjee (2008) prefer to call such theatre the 'hybrid theatre'. However, in their cultural contexts, hybridity is marked by a high level of colonial cultural elements, which does not seem to apply in the case of *Bidesiyā*. It still qualifies as, and is more close to the definition of what we generally mean by 'folk performance'.³⁴

The *Bidesiyā* culture emerged in response to the social reality of migration caused by colonialism and natural calamities (frequent famines and droughts). Following the *Bidesiyā* of Bhikhari Thakur, several other artists, who had already worked in his party (troupe), opened new *Bidesiyā* parties and continued the theatrical tradition.³⁵ At present,

³³ For instance, the people who migrated to Caribbean countries kept associating themselves from Bihar.

³⁴ R. Chatterjee (2007) argues that such performances exist between the folk and the popular as hybrid performance. However, my argument is that though there are such performances, which can be put under this category, for example, *Jātrā* or Tamil *Nātakama*, there exist popular folk performances as well.

³⁵ A *Bidesiyā* troupe is known as a party, the party is generally named after the name of the director.

there are more than 200 such *Bidesiyā* parties estimated to be performing across the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) region.³⁶ Since both the states (Bihar and UP) remain the biggest suppliers of cheap manual labourers to smaller cities and emerging metropolises, so, relevance of the culture and performance of *Bidesiyā* remains even today. Even though the plays of these *Bidesiyā* parties vary in their themes and may not deal with the issue of migration, their performances retain strong references of *Bidesiyā* and *pāradesiyā*, two popular terms for migrant workers. The performance is also about the society, which it entertains—a society of migrants that runs on money-order economy.

Vatsala Srivastava notes that even ‘before the *Bidesiyā* style, similar productions with songs, drama and a crew of male actors playing both the male and the female characters were called *Launḍā-nāc* in Bihar’ (‘Recounting Tales’). *Bidesiyā*, too, is referred to as the *Launḍā-nāc*, ‘the dance of the female impersonators’ or ‘the dance of young boys.’ The *Launḍās* are a popular and professional class of performers, who dance, sing, act and entertain the spectators in many genres of the folk performances besides *Bidesiyā*.³⁷ O Henry gives an elaborate account of their dancing style:

The *launda*’s performance ranges from the pleasantly sensual to the lewd. The *launda* makes a jerky hip dancing. He circles and turns with a gyrating pelvis, often one hand on his hip and the other behind his head. He might also lean back with his bent legs spread and arms in the air, jerk towards his leering, slightly crouched and pelvis-thrusting partner, who with hand at crotch level motions with his upraised thumb. At low caste gatherings, women sometimes cluster near or around the band

³⁶ The estimation is based on the number provided by the *Bidesiyā* party artists during my fieldwork.

³⁷ The *Launḍās* sing and dance on different social occasions ranging from marriages to festivals, and also to the tunes of varied songs—from the very auspicious ones (e.g., marriage songs) to Bollywood film songs.

and dance with other women, or rarely male kin, in this style.

(196)

Launḍās replace women in most of the theatrical genres across the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh region. In a society where the profession of performance is itself looked down upon, being a performer, belonging to a lower-caste (and class) and performing as a female impersonator, using coarse, ‘obscene’ and loud language are reasons enough to be denigrated in the eyes of the feudal, elite and upper-caste sections.³⁸ However, I would like to argue that the materiality embedded in cultural labour is one of the fundamental and common factors of the denigration of popular folk performances. The materiality of cultural labour is imbued in live, embodied and sexually loaded presence of the performance of cultural labour along with the history of material displacement (geographical and physical displacement) and in the aesthetics of physical debasement (in caricature, comics and jokes). In actual performance, this materiality gets reflected in the voice of the performer, singing, dancing, seducing and joking — in modulations and intensification of speed, tone, volume, rhythm and emphasis, in ‘the movement from deep down in the cavities, in the muscles and membranes’ (Barthes 181). Ultimately, it becomes what Barthes says, ‘the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue’ (182). This materiality brings story and characters into life. In this process, a performer engages and reengages the audience with material which is ‘intimately familiar’ to the audience as well as the performer (Pearson 40).

This chapter examines the materiality in the performance of cultural labour through the contemporary performance of *Bidesiyā*. The performance of *Bidesiyā*, like most performances of cultural labour, is marked by a high level of visibility of the languages of materiality. In fact, it is the strong visibility of materiality in the performance of cultural labour, which renders it to the state of invisibility in the middle-class and elitist

³⁸ This perception also has a class-caste bias, as the *launḍā* as *kalākār* (artist) is immensely valued by the lower-caste sections (Immam and Kalapura 49).

discourses. Jokes, obscenity along with laughter as the language of materiality are ‘the language of the earth and the body in their indissoluble unity’ (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 5). Materiality is also manifested in various forms of segregation and in the act of lowering the high. Besides, labour factors, such performances are intrinsically linked to the question of materiality. I am particularly interested in examining the strategies of distinction shaped by the materiality in the performance of cultural labour. It would be also interesting to see the ongoing objectification and marginalization of the language of materiality in the performance of *Bidesiyā*. Adding to this, Bihar becomes an interesting site to study this cultural marginalization in the absence of a considerable middle-class.³⁹

2. *Bidesiyā*: The Background of Performance

I don’t care for palaces, hey Ram

My beloved has gone to a foreign land).

(Kesodas 1837 qtd. in Narayan ‘Bidesia’) [1]

O beloved, *Holi-Diwali* [the festivals] has come

Buy a red *dupatta*, *bindī*, and come

Even if you cannot [*manage to*] buy, do come

Take the fastest train and come). (*Bidesiyā Party* 2010) [2]

Despite changes reflected in the above-mentioned songs, the performance of *Bidesiyā* continues to have some strong depictions of indentured migration. This tradition of performance goes back to the colonial period. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, the term *Bidesiyā* was primarily used for indentured labourers from the Bihar-Uttar Pradesh region of India who migrated, often forcibly, to work in the plantations of

³⁹This is important because most of the studies have been done in the opposite context, the context in which middle-class has played an important role in the shaping of a culture.

the Caribbean countries and other colonial centres.⁴⁰ This was the period when the British had suppressed the rebellion of 1857 and were looking to expand their empire after draining resources from the Indian subcontinent. Marx has argued that colonialism grows on ‘surplus labour’ (*Capital* 707). Thiara (1993) has shown this connection between British expansionism and the commoditization of Indian labour. As the empire was expanding, the colonialists were looking for additional labourers. The existing demand was fuelled by the official abolition of slavery in some parts of the world at the same time. At this point, ‘European colonies found themselves in great need of manpower for their plantations’ (Narayan ‘Bidesia’ 12).

On the other hand, colonialism had systematically destroyed agriculture and the various traditional industries (like weaving) which had resulted in ‘famine and massive disruption to livelihood’ (Vertovec qtd. in Cohen 59), thereby producing a flux of cheap labourers from the region. Due to its geographical location, migration was nothing new to the Bihar-UP region, and there were pre-existing patterns of intra-regional seasonal migration (Tiwari 1984; Prabhakar 2009). However, colonial migration was different in nature and ‘took place on a massive and sudden scale’ (Narayan ‘Bidesia’ 12).

Most of these migrants were from the lower-castes (around 70%), which included the agriculturalists (30%), artisans (7%), Dalits and other oppressed (Backward) castes (33%). Apart from this, around 14% were from the upper-castes, while another 14% were Muslims (Annual Report, Protectors of Emigrants, Calcutta, qtd. in Veer and Vertovec 151). There were two main reasons for low-level migration of the upper-castes: they were in a comparatively better socio-economic position and also crossing the sea was considered impure for them. Majumder illustrates that even the British were not interested in taking upper-caste migrants because they were not considered suitable for the heavy

⁴⁰ The European colonial countries set up a large number of sugar, coffee, cocoa, jute and other plantations in colonies like Surinam, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana and Trinidad (Majumder, ed., ‘Introduction’ 11).

and dirty work at the plantation sites. However, some poor upper-castes did migrate after renouncing their caste surnames (37).

These migrants were mainly young, mostly in their twenties, which was a common age for love, labour and serving the family. With the disappearance of a massive number of young people, there was anxiety, fear and chaos in the society. The colonial migration shook the very core of that society and became a marker of the culture of that period. The echoes of colonial migration and displacement found their expression in the existing song culture but with a qualitative change in content. For example, Krishna himself was transformed into a *bidesī* (migrant). The excessive spiritualism of the *Bhakti* (devotional) period faded when it came face-to-face with physical and material displacement. This was exactly the opposite of what happened during the nationalist revival movement when there was a very conscious attempt to accommodate the spiritual past. *Bidesiyā* emerged as the culture of an economically and psychologically broken people by accommodating the language of materiality. It fundamentally situates itself in the cultural realm of the political economy. The political economy of the *Bidesiyā* comes to the floor when its song strikes the very cord of culture:

Neither the train is our enemy, nor is the ship our enemy,

Money is the enemy/Money is the enemy

That compels our beloveds to migrate (to other lands) [3]

In the cultural landscape of the *Bidesiyā*, two geographically separated entities, the land and the displaced bodies, attempt to meet. They long for each other with lasting memory and imagination. The memory is less about the self (singular) and more about ‘themselves’, the sense of completeness that constitutes the self in a traditional community. The ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ sense of completeness becomes the basis of *Bidesiyā* culture. In Saidian understanding, we can say that *Bidesiyā* became an experience of exile whose ‘essential sadness can never be surmounted’ (Said 173). Unlike

the celebration of ‘incompleteness’ by Homi Bhabha (1998), *Bidesiyā* (re)presents the displacement and violence inherent in that incompleteness.⁴¹ In his play *Bidesiyā*, Bhikhari Thakur laments this incompleteness like a fish out of water (*jal binu machlī ke haliā Bidesiyā*). *Bidesiyā* emerged as an artistic expression of the communities.

The aesthetics of separation in *Bidesiyā* is based on constant emotional trauma, suffering, hope, desolation, love, complaint, longing and separation. At a psychological level, it is both melancholy and mourning. *Bidesiyā* becomes a cultural expression in which aesthetic experience relishes from *viraha* (longing in separation). The following song is beautifully interwoven around this aesthetic of *viraha*.

At midnight, the nightingale calls.

The pretty woman starts, arises and stands near the bed.

The mango has blossomed, the *mahuā* tree has flowered.

The sleep of the lady separated from her lover has been broken.

The breeze blows over her body.

The door to memories begins to open.

The flowers have blossomed; the bee hovers near.

Why has her beloved/husband not come home? (Ramchandra Harizan

‘*Ādhī Ādhī Ratiya*’) ⁴² [4]

In this aesthetic expression, there is a strong presence of submission and sacrifice for their bodies separated. For the people from both sides: the one who has left as well as the one who is left behind, the ‘*Bidesiyā* appears as a personal text of tribulation and trials’ for the migrants and their families (Chaturvedi ‘Bidesia of Bihar’). In the following song, collected from an old East Indian woman of Trinidad, we can see the extent of that trial a *bideśi* promises to undergo:

Like the plane flies across the skies,

⁴¹ Bhabha is optimistic about the possibility of living things back for future voices and perspectives (7).

⁴² The song was collected, transliterated and translated by Edward O Henry (Henry 2006).

I will fly along with you my beloved,
 Beloved,
 I will come along with you,
 Like the train runs along the tracks,
 I will run along with you O my beloved. (qtd. in Sharma 609) [5]

The expression of *Bidesiyā* becomes a hope and even a last resort to reconcile with what Rancière says the aesthetic community—*sensus communis*—a community based on common sensory experiences and a sense of ‘being together apart’ (Rancière ‘Aesthetic’).

Bhikhari Thakur: Portrayal of a *Bidesiyā*

Bidesiyā was developed by Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971), a poor lower-caste, barber, who himself worked as a migrant labourer in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Author of dozens of popular plays and numerous songs, Bhikhari Thakur founded his *Bidesiyā* troupe around 1916-1917, when the anti-colonialist movement was at its peak. As a person from a poor background, he followed his caste-based occupation of hairdressing for thirty years. As a keen observer of theatrical performances, Bhikhari Thakur was inspired by *Rāmalīlā*, *Rāsalīlā*, *Jātrā* and *Pārsī* theatre performances. After returning to his village, he started performing *Rāmāyaṇa* with a troupe. Although this performance of *Rāmāyaṇa* marked his earliest success, he was prevented by the upper-castes of the region from performing a religious text of such high importance (Prabhakar 57; Sanjeev 170). Dismayed by the incident, he joined the existing *Laundā-nāc* performance, which already had a theatrical structure with songs, dances, and crew actors performing lower-caste myths and legends.⁴³

⁴³ During my fieldwork, two other prominent names—Guddar Rai and Ganpat Rai—came up repeatedly. Their contributions seem immense in the development of the *Bidesiyā* theatre.

The significance of Bhikhari Thakur as a cultural personality and an important historical figure of eastern India lies in the fact that he brought about a creative blend of old and new, traditional and modern, art and life, labour and leisure, love and separation, religious and secular, trauma-tragedy and comedy together. One of his major contributions was the integration of the arts—dance, drama, music, song, dress, design, lighting and technology. Following the folk formula of cultural exchange, he incorporated everything he found interesting and exciting. Consequently, one can see the influence of the *Rāmalīlā*, *Rāsalīlā*, *Jātrā*, *Pārsī* theatre, *Nauṭāṅkī*, *Ankiānāt* in the *Bidesiyā*. He re-created the stories and songs from *Rāmalīlā*, *Rāsalīlā*, *Rāmachariatmānas*, *Māhābhārata*, *Pārsī* theatre with his own interpretations and innovations. He also used the available *Bhakti* (devotional) poetry, lower-caste songs (*Birāhā*, *Ālhā*, *Mallāh* songs), labour songs, women's songs (*Jantsār*, *Jhumar*, *Sohar*) and caste-based dances (*Dhobiā-nāc*, *Gond-nāc*, *Netuā-nāc*, *Chamārbāsā*) in his repertoire. His party combined the musical instruments of *ḍholak* (double-headed hand-drum), *tabalā* (drum), *sitār* (a plucked string instrument), *jhāl* (cymbal), *bansi* (flute); later, he also added the harmonium in his musical repertoire (Yadav 10). In his song writing, he experimented with the musical metres of the existing song genre of the *Kājri*, *Horī*, *Caitā*, *Caubolā*, *Bārahmāsā*, *Sohar*, *Vivāhgīt*, *Jantsār*, *Sorṭhī*, *Ālhā*, *Pachrā*, *Bhajan* and *Kirtan*.⁴⁴ Besides addressing contemporary social problems, *Bidesiyā* continued to play the ballads of lower-caste protagonists.⁴⁵ This 'synthesis', 'blending', 'hybridity', 'integration', 'amalgamation', 'mixing', 'fusion', 'syncretism' (whatever we choose to call it) of various art forms in theatrical styles was perhaps the main reason behind the success of Bhikhari's *Bidesiyā*. The popular performances of cultural labour tend to incorporate and mix. Popular theatrical performance in India inherits this 'mixing' tendency, which is like a thread connecting lower-caste cultures and performances across India. This 'mixing' against

⁴⁴ See Vatak (1979) for a detail discussion of North Indian folk music and song genres.

⁴⁵ I will be discussing one such legend-based performance in the next chapter.

purity is one of the fundamental reasons for the stigmatization of these popular forms. ‘Mixing’ too much is considered not only immoral, but also immaterial and even dangerous in a segregated society. It is mixing which distances such performances from the classical and elite traditions.⁴⁶

While Bhikhari Thakur’s artistic talent lay in the creative synthesis of art, his socio-political vision was influenced by the social reform movement of the nineteenth century (Hussain 2008; Chandrasekhar 2011). For example, in his play, *Beti-becvā* (The Daughter Seller), the daughter protests against unjust practices:

O Babuji, you took the money
 And gave me on contract
 O Babuji, you treated me like a goat
 You went to find me a husband
 And came with a contract
 You found me a husband
 He resembles my grandfather
 Bhikhari Thakur, a barber from Kutubpur is asking
 O Babuji, don’t do this ever again.⁴⁷ [6]

3. Politics of Materiality: Tradition, Modernity and Middle-class in Bihar

In 2010, Bollywood released a movie song, ‘*Munni badnām hui darling tere lie*’ (Munni becomes infamous for you, O darling). It attained mass popularity. However, the song was alleged to be a copy of a popular Bhojpuri folk song: ‘*Launḍā badnām huā nasībān tere lie*’ [*Launḍā* becomes infamous for you, O fortunate one (*audience*)], which had long been sung and performed by the *Launḍās* (female impersonators) of the Bihar-

⁴⁶ It does not mean that classical traditions do not mix, but the level of that mixing here is so much.

⁴⁷ In most of his songs, he used his caste and village identity, ‘Bhikhari Thakur, a barber from Kutubpur.’ This is the manner in which *Bidesiyā* artists put their signatures, through their names and castes.

Uttar Pradesh region.⁴⁸ With this Bollywood song, out of the blue, the *Launḍā* was in the spotlight. One of the glaring questions for me is why does the *Launḍā* remain infamous and ‘obscene’ while the Munni of Bollywood has become famous overnight singing the same ‘obscene’ song? In addition, what explains these different attitudes towards ‘obscenity’ and ‘vulgarity’ and their legitimacy? This was also the time when the Indian Premier League (IPL), a professional cricket league (limited to twenty overs), had introduced cheerleaders to dance in support of the teams, while, simultaneously, bar girls were banned from dancing in bars across the country. In this regard, Claire Pamment has observed that ‘while the bad girls of Pakistan’s contemporary Punjabi Theatre are accused of ‘obscenity’ and ‘vulgarity’ and punished by hard censorship, girls from ‘good family’ are actively promoted in Anglophone dramas’ (2012). Can we see such inconsistencies simply as the politics of the middle-class’ scholarly definition of respectability, morality and domesticity, domestic conjugality or puritanical anxiety as shown by scholars (P. Chatterjee 1986; R. Chatterjee 1993; C.Gupta 2002)? Or, should we say that the present Indian middle-class is a new middle-class in their taste and approach? I argue that the politics of tradition among the Indian middle-class is not determined by morality or modernity as such, rather, by the performativity of morality, modernity and tradition—not in utterance but in the claimant’s actual act which comes through their social location—often caste and class biases in Indian society.

Who belongs to this Indian middle-class? What is its cultural and historical identity? Leela Fernandes argues that the middle-class is more complex than what constituted Lord Macaulay’s assumption, ‘a class Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect’ (3). Although it is true that this group’s ‘newness (hybridity) rest[ed] on its colonial roots’, it was not just cultural in its nature (4). Fernandes argues that ‘culture in this context was defined in relationship to socio-

⁴⁸ There are several claimants for this song but there is the strongest possibility that the song was written by some *launḍā*-party. Local people also attribute this song to the *launḍās* of the regions.

economic location' (8). The formation of this class largely drew 'upper-caste Hindus or highborn Muslims or from service communities that had served in the courts of indigenous rulers and large landlords' (Joshi paraphrased in Fernandes 8). But in many cases, it was not their upper class status but rather their upper-caste status that qualified them to become middle-class; for example, in western India, middle-class people also came from poor literary castes (Dobbin 33-34). In general, Indian middle-class values are a hybrid (fundamentally interbred) of the native (upper-castes) and the colonial or western culture. In the beginning, this hybridity was brought out with 'the binary strains of Sanskrit revivalism and Westernization' (S. Chatterjee 'Mis-en-(Colonial-) Scene' 22).⁴⁹ In neo-colonial development, interests and aspirations of the middle-classes are tied to 'the fortunes of corporate capital' (P. Chatterjee 'Democracy' 58). No doubt, the middle-class is changing; yet, it maintains the core identity of the upper-caste and the liaison with western and colonial culture added by corporate values.

The transformation of Indian upper-castes into the middle-class amidst the nationalist movement necessitated an urge for a national cultural identity from the upper-caste viewpoints (Orsini *Hindi Public Sphere*). It should be noted, the lower-caste performers used to be considered low not only by the colonizers but also by the feudal upper-castes. Indeed, the role of the traditionally feudal castes was confined to that of connoisseurs, consumers and patrons of arts; rarely were they into the profession of performance. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that in feudal folk society, the performing arts were always the domain of the lower-castes and women. As mentioned, Rege (2002) has intricately shown this connection in the context of caste-based popular performances in Maharashtra. It was only after getting educated in the modern colonial set-up that the feudal upper-castes, who became the middleclass, took an active interest in the performing arts. In the last 200 years, the Indian middle-class not only successfully

⁴⁹ Even if, of late, some other castes have managed to enter the category of the middle-class, yet, the upper-caste identity (canons) sets the standard of the latter (Fernandes 67).

established itself as ‘the cultural class’ but also projected itself as the only cultural class in India. Ashish Nandy argues that ‘the new culture of the state has come to depend more and more on the expanding pan-Indian urban, middle-class culture, serving as an emerging mass culture’ (9). This image of the middle-class has been naturalized to an extent that it has become the model to assess other cultures. In other words, the middle-class as a class not only constructs a notion of culture but also is also responsible for the codification, certification and the dissemination of culture.

I argue here that this middle-class perspective is not limited to a puritanical and national middle-class. With some exceptions, even the progressive sections of this class largely have the same ‘civilizing’ notion of culture. The discourse of Indian culture and performance is the discourse between the ‘nationalist’ and ‘corporate’ and the ‘secular’ and ‘progressive’ middle-class (e.g., the discourses of morality, domesticity, nationalism, secularism, feminism etc.—within its own narrow ambit). This discourse and counter-discourse have obliterated the larger discourses of other classes, for example, the discourses of land, labour and caste. The larger argument that I am making is that under the shadow of the middle-class, the perspective of the upper-castes and the (neo)colonial and western perspectives themselves become the framework to understand cultures in the Indian context. In other words, it is basically the co-option of the cultural discourse within the middle-class cultural perspectives which is responsible for this politics of perception.

Kathryn Hansen observes that, for various reasons, the urban elite drama could not develop in north India (*Grounds* 40). As she has correctly pointed out, one of the reasons behind this is that the urban elite drama is largely a middle-class phenomenon. In the absence of the middleclass and their urban elite drama, north India is often cast as a culturally ‘bankrupt’ region. Viewed from this perspective, Bihar becomes a cultural barren land. The state is tagged as a state of uncivilized and rustic people. This cultural marginality is closely linked to middle-class discourses and perspectives of culture. For

instance, it is assumed that the absence of a decisive middle-class in Bihar is also responsible for the absence of ‘development’ and ‘culture’:

While the advent of the Raj of the capitalist, colonialist British, brought trade, some industry and even created a middle-class in the towns, it plunged Bihar into continuing backwardness. [...] At the same time, the Permanent Settlement created a class of parasitic landlords who, by and large, were interested neither in the improvement of agriculture nor in the contemporary cultural awakening. (Das 10)

Arvind Das’ argument reiterates the same assumption that without the ‘middle-class awakening’ Bihar would remain culturally backward. S. Chatterjee (2007) discusses how the regional expression of Bengal nationalism brought out the valorisation of culture and popular theatrical forms. This did not happen in Bihar in language, culture and region. S. Gupta refers to the non-development of Bihar as a case of retarded sub-nationalism (1496). Even during the nationalist movement, ‘the unit of social movement was caste, not village, or region’ (Gupta 1497). Bihar as a state does not have any single language or even an official regional language identity like other states (e.g., Bengal and Orissa).⁵⁰ Even when it came to learning the colonial language, the landlords and the aristocrats from this region did not show any interest for a long time. Local languages and local traditions of learning remained strong among the educated families (Orsini *Hindi Public Sphere* 2). In fact, they remained hostile to English education (S.Gupta 1498). This hostility hampered the social mobility necessary for the formation of a middle-class (1498), or in, what I would call, the ‘middle-classicization’ of culture. All of these factors have resulted in the failure of regional cultural expression through either language or performance. While colonial education provided a new perspective towards art and

⁵⁰ Different languages (many times only considered as dialects) are spoken across Bihar. This includes Angikā, Bajjīkā, Bhojpurī, Magahī, Maithilī, Urdu, and Hindi.

culture to the upper-caste patrons who were moving into the middle-class, the upper-castes of Bihar remained unchanged in their conventional attitude towards culture. They were neither interested in appropriating lower-caste cultures nor in banning them as happened in the other states.

In the case of Maharashtra, Naregal shows how, in the emerging cultural sphere, the interests of lower-caste performing communities were marginalized (80). This appropriation and cultural sanitization did not happen in Bihar; instead, lower-caste performing communities remained the key stakeholders in the performing arts. Although the nationwide ban on nautch (or *nāc*) traditions had some impact on aristocratic traditions in Bihar, other major traditions continued without any significant external intervention. But is this problem specific to a region? In fact, one can read this theme across India. My argument is that this perspective has a deeper caste and class meaning which cannot merely be reduced to a question of representation or cultural stereotypes of a region. Related to this is the question of materiality of cultural labour, which tends towards a sacrilege of the pure, sacred and high. From the other side, elite performance and aesthetic construct itself by de-materializing the materiality of culture.

4. Contemporary *Bidesiyā* (*Launḍā-nāc*) in Bihar

Structure and Change in Material Culture

In the 1990s, Globalization manifested in villages across India with Coca-Cola, colour TVs and the orchestra-culture which brought out changes that were the result of an ‘ideological (political) and consumerist (aesthetics) interest’ (Sasidharan 164). *Bidesiyā* started facing challenges from the orchestra culture. Orchestra parties involve women singers and dancers. They sing Hindi movie songs, mainly ‘item songs’ and perform on recorded songs. With the near demise of *Nautāṅkī* in this region, orchestra became the choice of the upper-castes. In the first phase, these orchestra groups were invited by the

upper-castes; later, however, they also became common among the dominant Dalits and other Backward Castes, who were the traditional patrons of the *Bidesiyā*. Young people were turning to the orchestra, especially on weddings and religious festivals.

In the absence of good patrons, several of the *Bidesiyā parties* were forced to stop performing. Some parties experimented in the face of new challenges. As a result, a new kind of *Bidesiyā* developed which incorporated several elements of the orchestra. One such experiment was carried out by the *Bidesiyā party* of Padarth Rai, who saw these changes as important for the survival of the genre. He was also of the view that the *Bidesiyā* had to address changing audience tastes. His party realized that the younger generations were more attuned to the orchestra elements so they decided to incorporate those, which, in his view, did not alter the beauty of the *Bidesiyā*. Padarth Rai incorporated many elements of orchestra culture saying that ‘only iron cuts iron’ (fighting fire with fire) (Padarth Rai Party Personal Interview 9 Nov. 2010). However, what happens when the iron is not solid enough to cut the other piece of iron and instead, in that process, cuts some of its own portion? Perhaps this is what happened in the case of the *Bidesiyā*.

A *Bidesiyā* party usually consists of eighteen members. Of them, five members constitute the musical repertoire and become part of the chorus: members playing *ḍholak*, *nagārā*, *Casio*, *jhāl* and *nāhar*. Four of them are called the masters or the *gurus*. They have one assistant. Other than them, there is one *mahant* or *ustād* (manager) of the party, who is known by his name. He is responsible for contacting artists, managing accounts and fixing programs. The *ustād* decides on the script, keeping in mind the training of the artists and their health, safety and travel. In this region of Bihar (i.e. Patna, Nalanda and Vaishali districts), the manager mainly belongs to one of the two castes: the *Yādavas* (Backward Caste) and the *Dusādhs* (Dalits). The power of caste is important when it comes to the selection of a manager. Artists prefer a manager from a powerful caste, or at

least one, which has a strong base in that particular region. That makes the entire group powerful, accords security and a degree of networking in terms of contacting and making clients. Besides these, the rest of the members are actors and at least five to six of them play the role of female impersonators on a regular basis.

The *Bidesiyā* parties are invited on two occasions: weddings and festivals. For a wedding ceremony, either the bride's side or the groom's side pays for the expenses. In the case of a festival, the money is collected from villagers as *chandā* (donation). The party charges around 5,000 to 6,000 Indian rupees for a night. Out of this, each artist makes around 200 to 300 rupees. Good artists get more money. Money also flows in as prizes and tips, which again need to be distributed between the artist and the organizer. The organizer provides transportation, accommodation and food. Every year, the party travels to three or four nearby districts. Unlike other such performances, like the *Nautankī*, the *Special Nātakam* (drama), and the *Yakṣagāna*, which went through successful commercialization and used ticketing for their shows, the *Bidesiyā*, despite being commercialized in its own style, still follows the conventional methods.

Song, music and dance as integrated forms are thoroughly used in *Bidesiyā*. It should be noted that around 75 per cent of the *Bidesiyā* dialogue is in the form of a song. Actors are also expected to be singers and dancers. Interestingly, from time to time, actors pitch in to play instruments and some musicians act. Often, a female impersonator also plays a male role in some scene, while in the next scene he may come back to perform a *Bidesiyā* song as a 'woman'. While the king speaks standard Hindi, other characters use local dialect. When it comes to the movement of characters, the characters follow a kind of social code in their artistic movement. For example, king uses slow movement but powerful steps. According to Seizer, the movement of a character on stage also represents their social status. In Tamil *Special Nātakam*, she notes that different degrees, as well as different kinds of physical movements are deemed appropriate for different persons (77).

She concludes that while the higher class remains stable, the lower-castes move to serve them. The case may be true but this can also be read in a different manner: while the higher class wants to control the order, the lower-caste's subversive body is not controllable. Many instances arise in the *Bidesiyā* where the movement of the joker and the 'women' appears not under control, nor serving the higher class. Their movements rather overshadow that authority. All characters use full throat projection. Everyone tries to maintain a high level of pitch and energy. Actors take either circular or half-circular movements.

Most of the movement on stage includes maximum use of the front portion of the stage and maintenance of a high level of energy throughout the performance. Commonly, broken and ungrammatical Hindi mixed with local dialects is used for the dialogue purposes. *Bidesiyā* artists take the stage as a 'battlefield.' On stage, like in a battlefield, one has to perform and be alert, otherwise one may lose the war or be killed by the enemy,' a performer told me. So, principally, for the artists, standing on stage is akin to standing in a battlefield. This shows the level of physical and mental alertness that the *Bidesiyā* artists supposedly take on stage. From the green room, I have often observed that even though the actors are feeling sleepy and many times even are half-asleep, once they enter the stage, they do not leave any sign or scope for laziness.

5. Materiality in the forms of Segregation

***Bidesiyā* Parties of Padarth Rai and Brahmdev Rai**

When I went to the field, I was well aware of the *Bidesiyā* parties of Padarth Rai and Brahmdev Rai. I had grown up watching their performances. That familiarity was one reason for selecting these parties as a part of my study. At the same time, I also watched performances from other parties to maintain an objective viewpoint. Padarth Rai and Brahmdev Rai are brothers who are now running the *Bidesiyā* parties in Bakhtiyarpur

block of Patna District in Bihar. Earlier, both ran the party together, until Brahmdev Rai formed his own independent party after separating from his elder brother. Padarth Rai has been running the party for the last thirty-nine years. He does not remember how many performances his party has done over all those years. Even if we assume 20-25 performances each year, the total comes to something around 1,000 performances in all. The average number of audiences during each performance that I witnessed was around 2000-3000. Both brothers and other parties claim that, on occasion, they have witnessed more than 3,000 people turning up for a performance.

Brahmdev Rai Mastāna Party at Mankaura village, Barh, Patna

On 18 October 2010, I called up Brahmdev Rai, who informed me that his party was going to perform at Mankaura village that night. He added with pride that the event was scheduled on the invitation of Vijay Singh, the headman of the village and a Rājapūta by caste. Since the *Bidesiyā* in this region is rarely invited by the upper-castes, he must have felt privileged by the recognition. The village was around six to seven kilometres inland from the nearest National Highway. The party had already reached there at five in the evening. I arrived by seven. The performance was being organized outside the village, at the community centre, where the village has a permanent stage. Unlike the *Nauṭāṅkī* of Uttar Pradesh and the *Special Nāṭakam* of Tamil Nadu, the *Bidesiyā* parties do not move with their stage-properties. In major cases, a stage for the performance is constructed using wooden carts by the villagers. The wooden carts are put together side by side which provides a raised platform. Then it is covered and decorated by erecting tents. A *Bidesiyā* party moves with minimum luggage (musical instruments, make-up, properties and their personal belongings). The organizer has to arrange for the stage, the lights and a sound-system. No advertising materials like posters or pamphlets are used. The oral form of publicity is still prevalent, some of it carried out through loudspeakers, which can easily

reach two or three nearby villages. On annual festivals, people already know because the party comes to perform every year.

Segregated Communities

During my initial survey, I got the following caste statistics for Mankaura village:

Kahār (Extremely Backward Caste): 120 households

Kumhār (Extremely Backward Caste): 70 households

Dusādh (Scheduled Caste): 50 households

Yādava (Other Backward Caste): 30 households

Rājapūta (Upper-caste): 25 households

Others (Mainly Backward Castes (BCs) and Dalits): 10-15 households

Despite being a minority in numbers, the *Rājapūta* caste dominates this village. The ex-village headman is also from this caste and they are the organizers of festivals and performances. The extent of the power and hegemony wielded by this caste can also be seen in the structure of their palatial houses, the level of education and their lifestyles. The village community centre comprises of two permanent buildings attached to each other: one is for the goddess Durgā and the other is for conducting social and political programs. For the purpose of this festival, the space had been enclosed and decorated. Outside the rectangular enclosure, small vendors sold sweets, food, beetle nuts, cigarettes and tobacco items. When I went inside, Brahmdev Rai proudly introduced me to the organizing committee, which mainly consisted of the upper-castes. I was informed that it was a three-day program—the first two days for the *Bidesiyā*, and on the final day, there would be a performance by a famous orchestra group from Patna. According to him, the orchestra party had charged 75,000 rupees for a night. On the other hand, the Brahmdev Rai party received only around 9,000 rupees for two days. I also wanted to meet people

from some other castes, but I was surrounded and followed by *Rājapūta* young boys, contractors and village leaders. I decided to meet them later. At that time, it occurred to me how easily ethnographers could fall into the hands of the dominant sections of the community and incorporate their dominant views into their interpretation; and also, how, for a more complete picture to emerge one needs to go back several times.

Around 9:00 p.m., the performance is about to start anytime now. The compound is packed with people. I go backstage to see the performers who were almost ready and so I wish them luck. One female impersonator asks me how (s)he looked. When I tell her that she looks terrific, everybody laughs. The performance begins around 9:30 p.m. with the *sumiran* (invocation) of the *Maiyā*, a mother deity (*Maiyā* is one of the deities I have already mentioned in the chapter I). On the stage, a female impersonator becomes the statue of the *Maiyā*, while the other female impersonators worship her in a re-enactment of the ritual ceremonies normally performed by women.⁵¹ By adopting the same *Maiyā* songs, without making any significant changes, the performers not only connected themselves with the women in the crowd, who perform the same ritual in real life, but also incorporated the latter's agency in their performance by performing their songs. The ritual becomes a part of the secular performance without missing its essence. The song of this invocation goes as follows:

Maiyā, the red colour of your *ṭīkā* is looking beautiful

Maiyā your colour is red

Maiyā you are red, the colour is red

The vermillion on your head is red

The *bindī* on your face is red

Maiyā you are red, the colour is red

(Brahmdev Rai Party '*Maiyā Lāle Rangwā nā*'). [7]

⁵¹ On several places, I have deliberately left some sentences in the present tense to give a prose energy.

The audience quietly enjoys the song. I hear some humming sounds coming from behind me. I look back and see some of the women humming the song along with the female impersonators. Although the ritual songs are used in this theatrical performance, both in ‘functions’ and in ‘approaches’ the basic aim remains different (Gilbert and Tompkins 59). Nevertheless, ritual elements in theatrical performance create, what Alexander calls, a ‘ritual effectiveness’, which intensifies the connection of the audiences through a fusion of ritual elements (527). Women in the audience take more interest in this performance piece because it gives them a sense of identification. Even in their absence, they could see their presence.

Segregated Space

The performance compound is almost full now. Children are sitting in the front row. A rope separates male and female audiences. Some of the males—teenagers and bachelors—are standing at the parameters. In a *Bidesiyā* performance, the audience sits with their peer groups: children are sitting with other children, the elderly with the elderly and the young stand with the young, while the upper-castes and other ‘special’ people have their chairs in a perimeter, close to the stage. All the others sit on the ground. The seating arrangements, while segregating the audience in terms of sex, castes, villages, age groups, etc., also provide a comfortable zone where aesthetic separation is enjoyed. Children may not express themselves if they are sitting with their parents. Young males will not make lewd remarks if they sit with their fathers or other family members. Girls may not express their reactions if they sit with their mothers. While the grouping provides an excellent space to express their reactions in a segregated society, it also maintains and reinforces certain social and spatial hierarchies. In the context of the *Special Nātakam*, Seizer also notes similar patterns of segregated seating (Seizer 180). This arrangement, although it symbolizes the social diversities of the audience, that diversity is very much

embedded in social hierarchy. This segregated space of performance based on gender, caste, class and age demonstrates the ghettoized nature of Indian society.

Segregation in Neo-colonial Exploration

As I have already argued how the marginalization of the performance of cultural labour is not only a product of normative western aesthetic but also the result of segregation. During my field exploration of *Bidesiyā*, I met a scholar and theatre practitioner who shared with me a story about his own exploration. Once, he had accompanied some fellow enthusiasts in search for some ‘authentic’ *Bidesiyā* artists: specifically those who had worked with Bhikhari Thakur. After months and days, they were able to locate a *Bidesiyā* artist who narrated some stories and showed the group a box in which he had preserved some costumes and headgears of the ‘authentic’ *Bidesiyā*. On that basis, this scholar and his group, designed the costumes and created a *Bidesiyā* for the middleclass. The example highlights the neo-colonial cultural exploration in which skins and skeletons are used in the name of finding the ‘theatre of roots’.⁵² This enthusiasm for folk forms was ‘similar to the colonizer’s enthusiasm for ‘ethnic’ theatre’ (Mee 208). In the theatre of roots movement, folk performances are presented as a spectacle of neo-colonial aesthetics, ‘like a lavishly decorated pageant of folk, tribal and traditional songs and dances, rites and rituals, costumes and myths-impressive on the outside, empty within’ (Mee 205). I assume that the exploration was a part of the theatre of roots movement.⁵³ I was surprised as to why the enthusiasts did not try to meet some contemporary performers of the *Bidesiyā*. I was told that the *Bidesiyā* is no longer performed by anyone, that it no longer existed. Interestingly, by that time, I had already met around six *Bidesiyā* parties and watched some of their performances.

⁵² The roots movement was supposed to reverse the colonial model of theatre by rejecting the proscenium.

⁵³ Following the model of the roots movement, Satish Anand and Sanjay Upadhyay, two important directors from the National School of Drama (NSD), have done several plays in the *Bidesiyā* style.

According to a scholar, in the name of the *Bidesiyā*, some people were performing ‘obscene’ *randī-nāc* (dance of prostitutes) to make money. This is a typical comment of urban-based middle-class, also noted by Seizer (in *Special Nātakam*), de Bruin (in *Kaṭṭaikkūttu*) and S. Chatterjee (in *Jātra*) in their studies. Folk performances are (re)presented as ‘degraded’, ‘deteriorated’, ‘low art’ residues of a once flourishing tradition’ (de Bruin 1999; S. Chatterjee 2007). This deterioration is blamed upon the lower-caste artists, the market, morality, with real and perceived political overtones of rescue and preservation. The same argument was made against many other performing arts prior to the middle-classes taking them over. While contemporary scholars take pride in the *Bidesiyā* of Bhikhari Thakur, they dismiss contemporary *Bidesiyā* as too obscene. Similarly, while the *Bidesiyā* of middle-class directors are recognized and credited, the popular *Bidesiyā* becomes invisible. In this context, it is relevant to ask: When was *Bidesiyā* or popular folk performance not obscene? Ganguly remembers that even Bhikhari’s *Bidesiyā* was not watched by members of *śarīfā gharānās* [good household] because of their [obscene] language and form.⁵⁴ The strong presence of obscenity in Bhikhari Thakur’s *Bidesiyā* was also noted by R.N.Singh:

[Bhikhari Thakur] had incorporated dance of *dhobiā-dhobiniā* in *Bidesiyā*, which was of low level and very obscene. [...]
One day they sang, ‘*Dhobiniā ke chauri ihe bda biṣniya ki mai ghaṭie par nahāī/ sabh ras lelase he Mallāha Chhokaṛba ki muhbā ke suratī nasāi*’ (Daughter of washerwomen is too bold, she takes bath at the bank of river/Young male fishermen is chewing tobacco and taking all he *rasa* inside). *Aur bhi bahut kuch thā jo kahne lāyak nahin hai* (There were several other things which are too obscene to express here). (‘Jankavi’)

⁵⁴ Ganguly alleges that since the civil society did not prefer the name *Laundā-nāc*, they started calling it as *Bidesiyā* (‘Bhikhari Thakur ka Modify Rūp’).

In recent years, there has been a conscious attempt by middle-class practitioners to cleanse the obscene elements of the *Bidesiyā* to fit it into the middle-class moral standards. There is also an attempt to segregate the *Launḍā-nāc* from the *Bidesiyā*. This segregation is about materiality. In other words, materiality of the performance of cultural labour is the basis of segregation of bodies and space. By segregating bodies and space, a society also creates aesthetic taste and social distinction.

6. Languages of Materiality: Jokes and Obscenity

Obscene to Objectification

It is quite evident from the above discussion that obscene songs are not new to the *Bidesiyā*. Nevertheless, due to the process of cultural commoditization through cassettes and the orchestra culture, there has been an overall increase in the objectified and sexualized content (Manuel 1993). Earlier the *Bidesiyā* had its own double entendre songs, which had references to erotic love and sex. In the *Lāvanī* performances of Maharashtra, Rege notes that such songs were a part of the everyday lived experiences of the common people (2002). The *Bidesiyā* also picked up such songs from the society and even from the local *koṭhās*, traditional public settings for erotic performers. Again, the songs of the *koṭhās* were much objectified. The commercialization of songs through cassettes and the orchestra culture did not only lead to a transformation in the nature of the *Bidesiyā* songs but also in their mass consumption. Manuel remarks how the cinema and cassette cultures only subscribed to particular genres of the folk song—either religious or titillating erotic songs (Manuel 172; Chandrashekar 30). All other types of folk songs about nature, labour and agriculture were marginalized. Such titillating erotic songs in the *Bidesiyā* nowadays are known as item songs, following the much objectified ‘item numbers’ or ‘item songs’ from Bollywood. The songs are ‘designed for the objectifying, voyeuristic male gaze’ (Manuel 204). During the performance, the demand

for such songs comes mainly from young male audiences. But the performers maintain that everyone enjoys these songs; although they may not express it and many times they may not feel comfortable in public (Padarth Rai Party Personal Interview 9 Nov. 2010). Though ‘obscenity’ is not a new phenomenon and not solely related to mass media, it relates to cultural hierarchy and exclusion and legitimacy from the performing arts, which also existed in the feudal culture, nevertheless, the mass media has played a vital role.

Obscene jokes and songs were always a part of the lower-caste class culture (Chowdhry 2001). Usha Banerjee explains that ribald folk songs were a part of the rural folk—like the *Ahīrs* and the *Gujjars* [Backward Castes]—whose women use to sing such songs, unlike in the communities of the Brahmins or the [upper-caste] Muslims (Banerjee qtd. in Manuel 218). However, this obscenity has its own specificity. One can still find women’s doggerel as being overtly obscene. Manuel notes that ‘while married rural women might enjoy singing spicy songs amongst each other in their homes and villages, they would never sing such songs in public, or on cassette’ (175). Though I agree with Manuel, I see some of these problems in the sanitization of public spaces and the masculinisation of the ‘obscene’. The problem also rests in objectification per se and not in obscenity itself. I will discuss this point in detail later. First, let us see what the actors sing about and perform in these item songs. It should be noted that all these songs are a part of popular commercial recordings (including cassettes, CDs, DVDs, etc.) and the orchestra culture. For these item songs, the ‘women’ of the *Bidesiyā* are required to wear short skirts and pants, to become what an audience calls ‘mod’ (modern). In an objectified manner, in this particular *Bidesiyā* performance, the ‘women’ sing:

Put a scarf on my face, and enjoy, O king!

Have fun at home and in the attic)

Touch my lips with yours

And enjoy more O king

Now unbutton me, O king!

My youth is brimming over,

Put a scarf on my face and enjoy, O king! [8]

A female impersonator performs the song with a male partner and it is copied along the lines of the song in the video. The song becomes, in comparison to the orchestra, more lewd when it is performed in the 'lewd' style of the *Launḍā-nāc*. The audiences' response is immense for such songs; and like always, the children and the young males are the most expressive. Some of males even take out cigarettes and smoke (smoking in front of the elders is not considered good behaviour). It seems as if the power of obscenity rejects the power of authority. Next an orchestra song, which is a pre-recorded and uses many euphemisms, is performed:

Somebody will rule the door of your heart one day

Your big blown balloons will bump out one day [9]

Audiences familiar with cultural euphemisms and symbols can easily understand the songs. The video of this song has been circulating through CDs and DVDs on a mass scale. After the performance, I came to know that the actors had learnt the song by watching the video.

Comparing the *Bidesiyā* item song with the orchestra song, I did not see much difference between the two, which, besides other things, leaves small space for experimentation or improvisation. The *Bidesiyā* has not only appropriated the orchestra but has also been appropriated by their objectified values. With a special focus on sex, these love [or sex] songs seem to have become a manifestation of the physical craving of the male audiences. Manuel succinctly remarks:

[*The songs*] portray women as fundamentally libidinous and potentially unfaithful. Many of them can serve to reinforce an

ideological complex justifying misogyny, harassment, hackling
and rape: ‘women all want sex, they pretend not to. (204)

However, the obscene elements in *Bidesiyā* also suggest obscenity without objectification. That is indeed a more true reflection of materiality in the language and form of obscenity.

Obscene without Objectification

Next, the actors are introduced in a style perhaps drawn from the *Pārsī* Theatre or the *Nauṭāṅkī*. A senior artist introduces the actors announcing, ‘Let’s welcome Gudia Rani from Calcutta. O folks what to say about Gudia Rani, Gudia Rani is like a small vehicle, so even if there is a traffic jam she can pass through the narrow way.’ The announcement has obscene connotations. In addition, it should be noted that neither the actor’s name is Gudia Rani, nor is (s)he from Calcutta. The female impersonator is not going to play the role of Gudia Rani. It is all made-up to create theatrical sensation. ‘Now, let’s welcome Sonia Begum from Lucknow,’ and so continue such theatrical announcements. Each actor comes to the stage and freezes in a certain dancing pose. As the introductions end, the group performs a dance piece, which attempts to include all the movements of the *Launḍā-nāc*. One actor explains that this dance needs to be excellent because it sets the pattern for the whole performance. At the same time, he says, it also helps to recall all possible dance movements that the actors can use in their performance. In this dance segment, the actors change the choreography to follow the musicians, who keep changing the musical *tāla* (rhythm). This ‘dancing poses’ scene is one of the most energetic and a fantastic scene on the *Bidesiyā* stage that draws the audience ‘in’.

Obscenity has been the major language of jokes, folks and common culture throughout the world: in attic comedy, Shakespeare’s comedy, Aristophanes’ plays Dario FO’s satires, Chinese *Gezaixi*, African oratures, and Indian folk performances. Kerstin

Mey defines ‘obscurity’ as a cultural category ‘applied to denote indecent and vulgar, dirty and lewd, gross and vile and thus morally corrupting and potentially illicit character’ (2). Obscurity has a meaning, which is ‘broader than simply the sexually explicit and alluring representations of flesh, as is commonly accepted in the western countries’ (Mey 5). In this regard, Mey has rightly argued that ‘obscurity is closely bound up with the segregation between high and low culture’ (2). Thus, one can say that obscurity is not just about the subversion of language or representation but it is also about the materiality and corporeality of caste and labour in the Indian context. It is about manual and physical labour and labour pain. In production, obscurity is the theory of caste, class and gender segregation. Both in theory and in practice, obscurity adheres to the dirty, the polluted, and the staining (Platter 206). In the Indian context, obscurity stands against purity, which is one of the basic theories of caste hierarchy. More so, as Highet argues, if one wants to understand any age [then] one ought to read not only its heroic and philosophical books but also its comic and satirical books (Highet qtd. in Seigel xi). However, in Indian culture, ‘obscurity’ was a core part of the ‘classical’ court traditions, of elite entertainment by courtesans. This obscurity is judged differently in elite and in ‘low’ spheres, or, in particular in public spheres, within a modern nation state (Hunt 1996).

In the *Bidesiyā*, obscurity mainly appears in the lewd act of the *laundā* and in the jokes and satires of the joker. Nevertheless, obscurity, in its core, is the language of materiality, ‘the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is transferred to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and the body in their indissoluble unity’ (Bakhtin 5). According to Bakhtin, obscurity emulates a means of resistance to the dominant culture. Seigel notes that in the Indian context, ‘satire is an aesthetic mode of attack,’ directed against the powerful and is ‘characterized by degrading vulgarities’ (57). Dario Fo gives it a class perspective and asserts that unlike the burgeoning bourgeois culture which is part revolutionary and part reactionary, the common culture, ‘which

derives from vernacular language has the courage to express certain facts about the obscene and the liberatory game embedded in the obscene; all of which is radical'(163).

Against this appreciation of the obscene, Mbembe rightly argues that the grotesque and the obscene can also be located within the powerful as an 'aesthetics of vulgarity' (4). However, at the same time, it is not entirely true that in the postcolony, obscenity has become officialdom because of the regime of constraints. While not denying that in the post-colony, what Mbembe calls 'the aesthetics of vulgarity' has a strong presence, it must be remembered that there also exists the aesthetics of obscenity that may resist and can subvert the power of authority. There are questions of legitimacy attached to obscenity. What I call the 'aesthetics of obscenity' represents the obscene without objectification and has its strong presence in the Indian performances of cultural labour. The obscene without objectification is not only subversive in its approach but it can also work as a strategy. One argument, which is usually put up against the use of obscenity in India, is that it is used either against women or against the lower-castes. In both these cases, the obscene becomes the language of objectification. It is also argued that objectification is so deeply embedded in the Indian social hierarchy that we cannot think obscene without objectification. These arguments are not entirely true. Despite its objectification and commoditization, both by the feudal and corporate cultures, obscenity as subversive language is still very much used by the lower order of the society in their daily lives; many of them are, in fact, very subversive.

Sex, Jokes and Obscenity

***Launḍā* between Aestheticization and Sexualization**

JING: You are a fake woman.

DAN: I am a real woman.

JING: As a woman, then, why did you not bind your feet?

MO: You should look upwards. (Qian qtd. in Tian 80)

Owing to the prominent role of the female impersonators in *Bidesiyā*, the style is also known as the *Launḍā-nāc*. Although males play female roles in other performance genres also, for instance, in *Rāmalīlā* and *Kriṣṇalīlā* and even in the western-inspired modern drama, they are not called *launḍās*. They are rather referred to as people who are doing *strī-bhūmikā* (a person playing a woman's role). A *launḍā* is particularly recognized by his distinct style of dance that is called the *launḍā-nāc*.

In contemporary theatre discourses, cross gendering on stage is mainly viewed as the politics of gender—either as a cultural institution to suppress women by creating the new gender role of ‘woman’ (Case 9)—or as a substitution of men for absent women. O’ Henry also views *Launḍā* role as an institutional correlate of the purdah (196). The argument appears quite evident in a society, which is feudal and patriarchal in its nature, however, the presence of male impersonators in the form of the *Domkac* in the same society problematizes such easy conclusions.⁵⁵ Hansen, in her studies of the Indian female impersonators in *Nauṭāṅkī*, *Pārsī theatre* and the *Bhavāī*, argues that ‘this simplistic notion of substituting men for absent women must be questioned’ (‘Theatrical Transvestism’ 64). I would like to argue that the female impersonators need to be seen beyond the narrow definition of gender performance. Burt argues:

Men in dance have tap-danced around conformity and expectations, learnt to fit in and stand out by turns and in the process embodied change that has the potential to enlighten and help liberate us all from narrow definitions of gender performances. (23)

What then is the purpose of impersonation? One day, while waiting for the morning tea after a whole night of performance, I was talking to a ‘woman’ of *Bidesiyā*

⁵⁵A *Domkac* is a male impersonator performance from the north Bihar region, performed during marriage.

who had been performing the role for almost ten to twelve years. We discussed many things, from family life to education. He wanted to be my matchmaker. But to become one, one needs to know the caste of a person. ‘What is your caste,’ he asked me. I told him. Then I asked about his caste. He said an artist does not have a caste. We laughed. ‘I should not ask your caste. Tell me your full name or the name of your father. Mind it I am not asking about your caste,’ I asked indirectly. We laughed again because it was another way of asking caste of a person. He told me his caste. Coincidentally, we were both from the same caste. Our same caste identities brought us closer to each other. In his party, he is considered one of the senior artists and is known for his good mimetic voice. When he sang as a ‘woman’, the women in the audience would sob. I asked him the main question:

You have been performing as a female impersonator for more than ten years, how much female, or feminine do you feel through your body while performing on the stage and outside of the stage? Is there some special ‘gendered’ behaviour you have developed through the years?⁵⁶

He looked back at me and laughed at my question, saying:

Brother! I have also been performing the role of Rāvana for almost fifteen years, so do you think I have developed ten heads (Rāvana was supposed to have ten-heads)? And he has been (indicating another actor) playing the King’s role in the *Bidesiyā* for ten years, did he become the king? Or is he behaving like a king in real life? It’s simply about playing a role. Of course, you have to understand the characters and the emotions of those whose roles you are playing.

He went on to explain:

⁵⁶ It is based on the discussion on 19 Oct. 2010.

What if someone asks you to play the king on stage, what will you do? You will hold your chest high, take slightly big and slow steps, make straight movements of the head and the eyes and put on the attire of a king. You will be the king then. Or, if you have to play, suppose, a school child, you will speak like a child; you will keep jumping like a child. This is the technique. This is what we artists do. The same applies for female impersonators.

‘That’s all?’ I asked and he responded: ‘If that’s not all, then you can understand more; but this is what I have understood after my long association with the *Bidesiyā* as a *Launḍā*’. Tea was brought; he took a sip of the tea. The boy, who had come to give him tea, asked if I also belonged to the party and what role I played. To this, the artist replied, ‘The man is under training and will be becoming a *Launḍā* the next time. He has been freshly imported from Delhi.’ I too got a special tea. His views on impersonation remind me of the modalities discussed by Barba and Savarese (1991) because apart from his role of the female impersonator: he also plays male roles on other occasions. Many times, he plays a musical instrument. In the first scene, he appears wearing the Indian dress of ‘*ghāghrā* and *colī*’, as a female impersonator, performing like a ‘woman’; while in another scene he comes as a boy, a son of the king. According to Barba:

In the Indian tradition, like similar terms in other traditions, you have the *lasya* and the *tandava*. These terms do not refer to women and men or to masculine and feminine qualities, but to *softness* and *vigour* as aspects of energy. The warrior Rama, for example, is often represented in the ‘soft’ manner: *lasya*. [...] It would be arbitrary to particularise them sexually. (81)

When it comes to the question of performing as female a impersonator, in most of the discourses (from colonial to postcolonial), the artists playing these roles are viewed

with respect to their gender and sexual identity. As in the case of classical drag, Sue Ellen-Case argues that it was the product of a patriarchal society. In classical culture, there was a division between the private and the public life. In this division, while ‘the public life becomes privileged,’ ‘the private life remains relatively invisible’ (318). She further points out that the result of the suppression of actual women in the classical world created the invention of a representation of the gender ‘Woman’ within that culture (318). While that is nevertheless true, the art of impersonation, outside gender, also provides a scope for playfulness and adds to theatricality. It is not entirely true that the ‘women’ on stage always represent patriarchal values and suppress the experiences of real women, as it is argued by Case. Although after Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, the debates are further problematized. However, there is also a tendency among western scholars and their Indian counter parts to sexualize and essentialize the role of performing women and female impersonators on and outside of the stage. Kapur challenges that, ‘there can be no female impersonation outside the ground of performance’ (‘Impersonation’ 114).

An NGO report, *Dancing Boys: Traditional Prostitution of Young Males in India*, on *Laundā-nāc*, submitted to the United Nations Development Programme in 2007, says:

In parts of rural Bihar and UP, men satisfy their wild sexual urges with these effeminate young men for several reasons because, they are available, identifies, social ally sanctioned for prostitution purpose and having sex with them proves the *mardangi*. [...] Traditionalists may proudly declare how the dance parties of Bihar and UP are keeping alive an age old tradition through the *launda naach* ceremonies, hard facts call for urgent intervention and rehabilitation of these talented young impressionable boys [*sic*] and thus the government should ban such ‘cheap entertainment’ [*emphasis added*].

The report finally shows that the *launḍā* are the most marginalized and vulnerable community, not a marginalized performing community but a marginalized sexual community. This is very similar to that colonial view in which courtesans were seen as harbingers of contagious diseases, rather than as singing and dancing girls (Dutt and Munshi 2010; Bhatia 2011).

I read this report before embarking on my fieldwork. Prior to this report, I never knew that a *launḍā* is essentially a ‘sex-worker’. I took the report seriously. However, after my fieldwork and after having read some other material on the merits and the nature of such reports, I am certain that a lot that is written about the social status of a *launḍā* or female impersonators is pure fiction.⁵⁷ By pointing out this dual process of the institutionalization of a fiction, I do not intend to argue for any non-sexualized puritanical concept of culture or the ‘aesthetic’ view of art, which does not involve the politics of gender and sex in the process of acting or cross-dressing per se. My point is that such politics further marginalizes the space for performing women and female impersonators in the context of Third World.

Analysed from the Western realistic gaze, the theatrical representation on stage becomes the ritualistic representation of real life. These ideas have now been appropriated by the Indian elite too. In this gaze (perspective), the dual identity of a performing body and the estrangement technique of the audience get undermined. The art of impersonation merely becomes a tradition of transgender and the representation of a sexual minority. I argue that the problem of performing women and ‘women’ is as much that of gender as of the aesthetic. Aesthetics in this context also involve the politics of gender, but it is more than that. We can take Rancière’s theorization of aesthetics in this regard.

⁵⁷ Studies show how NGOs funded by international agencies have constructed a fiction around sex related diseases, AIDS and sex related identity discourses, in the developing countries in Africa and Asia, in the name of liberating the sexually repressed (Kole 2007).

To illustrate my point, I will begin by asking some fundamental questions: Why did the colonialists see the performing women as sex workers and not view them (through their primary identity) as performing artists? What do scholars mean when they assert that, in India, during the colonial period, actresses were considered to be ‘prostitutes’? Perhaps, they mean to say that an actress should not be considered a ‘prostitute’. Thus, prostitutes were degraded and definitely not considered actresses. My argument is that indirectly we are falling into the same western and colonial trap, which primarily views performing women and female impersonators in terms of their sexual identity. It does not mean that performing women do not have a sexual identity but in order to recover their identity from the colonial discourse, I argue that we need to recover their artistic and labour identity. We can see a colonial-postcolonial continuity in the existing discourse.

The point is, thus, not to escape from gender discourse but to take the performing women’s discourse beyond gender and sexual identity—to make it more inclusive with an emphasis on skill, artistry and the meaning of labour beyond sexual labour. In this regard, Lata Singh’s proposition is noteworthy, in which she asks to ‘move beyond the paradigm of respectability discourse by fore-fronting the identities of the actresses as artists and workers’ (270). If we place the art of female impersonation in the same context, as is argued by Singh, then the *laundā* cannot be viewed as antagonistic to performing women on the stage, as it is viewed in the drag discourses in the West. Based on my respondents from *Bidesiyā*, I argue that female impersonation may not involve psychological and bodily manoeuvring at a deeper level. Impersonation is used merely as a theatre technique or what Barba calls the ‘modalities.’ However, I do not agree with Barba that on a pre-expressive level, sex is of little importance (Barba and Savarese 81). In the *Bidesiyā*, it is not only the female impersonator who impersonates; rather all the characters are impersonators in themselves (remember the impersonation of Ravana). Impersonation works as a technique for language, characterization, and movements. Here, the *Bidesiyā*’s

launḍā seems to be using, what Joanna Freuh calls ‘the art of seduction’, in which the intention is not to attract the audience sexually but to charge an atmosphere erotically (Freuh qtd. in Augusburg 90).

The point is one must not undermine the fact that the female impersonation, across cultures, in one way or another, is a sign of the male dominated public performance spaces. However, understanding impersonation only in the context of gender undermines how the theatricality and the immense possibilities of representation rest upon the art of impersonation. I think we tend to mix two separate problems together: that of the representation of women on stage and of representing women on stage.

Folk is always ‘Fucking’: The Aesthetics of Obscenity

The *Ustād* of the party leaves the stage after introducing the characters and requesting the audience to be peaceful during the performance. The joker appears after him. He also makes an appeal to the audience to be peaceful, but this he does in his own style—in a comic manner. He occupies the front stage and says:

Don’t worry if you have come to watch our *Bidesiyā* performance. You will enjoy it. Be peaceful. Don’t make unnecessary noise; otherwise I will demean the name of your village in other villages. Enjoy it. It will be a good experience for you, because you know our performance is always fucking [*He says in the manner of a riddle. The audience laughs and shouts*].

You audience may ask, why is it so? Ask ...ask [*He pauses*].

‘Why is it so?’ Some teenagers, while laughing, ask the joker. ‘W-h-y is it so’, the joker imitates those boys, ‘Alright, listen!’ He continues:

See! If we perform well, then you people will say: ‘*OHH*, superb...simply a Fucking performance.’ [*Audience laughs*]. But

... even if we perform not so well, then also you people will say the same thing: ‘*Uh-oh [He acts disgusted], fuck you...what a fucking performance!*’ [*The audience laughs uncontrollably*]. So you can see in both ways our performance is fucking. Even I as a joker am always fucked with. Nobody takes my name without fucking me. Hey, what do you call me? *Saar* (fucking) joker! [*The joker makes all round on the stage as he proves his proposition, and the audience enjoys the movement*]. Listen...listen...may be tomorrow, our party will travel to other places to perform and people may ask there: ‘How were the performance and the audience there?’ If you people do not treat us well, then of course we will be angry and may say: ‘Damn! Don’t take their name! They were simply ungrateful fucking audiences.’ But if you treat us well and be peaceful during our performance, then [*a dramaticpause*] and then also we will say: ‘They were great, they understand our art. Brother!...aaha...uhhu...aeheh.Wonderful they were... simply fucking!’ Thus, I say, ‘Our performance is always fucking.’

Amidst the laughter, one audience comments, ‘What a fucking joker...bloody will give us a stomach pain [*after laughing so much*]’. Among the enthralled audiences, I could not stop myself from saying: ‘What a fucking performance!’ Theatrical walls between the performer and the audience collapse, in particular, when the joker of the *Bidesiyā* and its audience hurl insult [songs] on each other. The joker is a buffoon, satirist and the monkey king of the *Bidesiyā* stage. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the jokers are considered bastards and ungrateful sons of Bharata, who after learning the technique of *Nāṭya* ridicules the god and goddess of art. Poor Bharata regrets:

Once they had mastered [the *Natyashastra*], my sons began to ridicule everyone in the entire universe with farces. My sons began to ridicule everyone in the entire universe with farces [...] and soon they performed a satire of the Divine Sages, a play full of vulgarities. [...]. The Divine Sages, justly angered by the satire, condemned the sons of Bharata to be born on earth as members of the lowest caste. (Seigel 57-58)

When the sons of Bharata became the lower-castes, they became even more threatening for the hegemonic religion and the moral authority. Thus the figure of Lord Brahma, who, like Plato, could see the levelling quality in jokes, the levelling quality that had reduced the status of god's divine power to an earthly materiality, had to impart a moral lesson. That is *nāṭya* offers religion for religious people, pleasure for pleasure seekers, restraints for the bad, tolerance for the well-behaved, courage to the cowards and energy to the braves (Rangacharya 1).

The *Bidesiyā* joker is, what I will say an 'inappropriate' character who, by the technique of inappropriate-ness, becomes the centre of jokes and comedy. He makes inappropriate movements, wears an inappropriate dress, speaks an inappropriate language and plays an inappropriate character; he makes the text out of context and takes the context out of the text. In the *Bidesiyā*, he becomes inappropriate in the boundary of the tradition and the modern—he may play a minister from 900 AD and still wear a hat from the twenty-first century. The joker breaks the boundaries and even when he makes jokes about himself, it is he who controls those jokes. On the other hand, he is the uncontrollable one, over whom no authority can have any control. He becomes the master of the jokes, the satires, and the obscenity. In the jokes, the satires and the obscene, it is important as to who wields control over these elements.

Jokes and obscenity also create a democratic space. In the *Bidesiyā*, the joker comments on society from his lower class status. In most of the folk performances (also in *Bidesiyā*), the Brahmin, the teacher, the leader, the chair and the powerful, become the butt of all jokes. In the lower-castes' and folk imagination, the Brahmin is considered to be the most intelligent and a cunning caste. Thus, the Brahmin priest becomes the main target of the joker. The joker of the *Bidesiyā* abuses him, ridicules him, mocks at his rituals and even thrashes him. Modern education and the *guru-śiṣya* tradition are the other targets. Unlike aristocratic beliefs, the joker ridicules modern education and the power of the guru; especially, the ensuing parroting becomes his targets. He ridicules the autocratic educational system, its strict rules and stringent punishment system. The politician and the symbols of power—that is, the chair and 'democracy'—are also at the receiving end of the joker's sarcasm. In this context, like in Aristophanes' comedy, comedy becomes a tool to democratize social and political institutions. Although Seigal opines that comedy works for the sake of comedy, the same view echoed in Freud's analysis of the joke, Platter argues that 'far from being an instrument of personal liberation, the jokes and the obscene appear to be intimately connected with democratic institutionalization' (Platter 206). It was not merely the utterance of obscene language (in terms of theatricality) which appealed to the comic poets; it was the use of obscenity as a means of abuse, criticism and degradation which attracted them (Henderson 74). The metaphorical expressions and the double entendres used in jokes, satires and the obscene give a space for creativity and the opening of hidden meanings.

7. Other Manifestations of Materiality

Lowering of High

In the performance, the king asks, 'Where is my *kursi* (the royal chair, referring to the political power)?' The chair is a symbol of power for most of these labouring people:

the king used to fight for the chair (power) and the electorate democracy is all about the chair. The chair also represents authority. In response to the king's remarks, the following dialogue ensues between the joker and the king:

JOKER: What do you mean by *kursi*? Can you explain?

KING: What a fool! Don't you understand chair?

JOKER: No my lord. I am a stupid person, you will have to define chair for me.

[The King gives some clues]

JOKER: Now I know. You mean the same chair for which all our leaders fight.

KING: I mean just wooden or plastic chair. Bring that chair.

JOKER (*he calls to the chair*): O fucking chair, come!

KING: Do you think if you call the chair, it will come? Stupid! You have to bring the chair. Go and bring the chair and put it in the durbar. *[The joker goes to fetch the chair but that day, by mistake, he has forgotten to put the chair in the green room. Consequently, he now has to improvise]*

JOKER: King! The chair has been stolen. The chair is nowhere, the chair is stolen. KING: Where were you when the chair was being stolen?
[Someone passes a chair]

JOKER: Alright the chair has been found. *[The king beats the joker with a whip; in revenge, the joker beats the chair. The joker puts the chair on his head]*

JOKER: Come and have a seat.

KING: Stupid! *[To the audience]* He has kept the chair on his head and is asking me to sit.

JOKER: Yes the chair is ready. Come and sit. Don't you people always want the chair high? So, come and sit?

KING: On your head?

JOKER: Didn't you realize yet that you always sit on our heads.

KING: Idiot! Put the chair down.

JOKER: No, I will not put the chair down; this will be an insult to the chair.

KING: What do you mean?

JOKER: For this chair, the people who wear long *kurtā* [*the leaders*] have put sticks in each other's mouths [*obscene remarks*]. Many headmen, many leaders have been killed for this chair and you are asking me to put it down. I won't do it.

KING: This chair is not *that* chair...*that* chair is called the political chair.

JOKER: Do you mean this chair is different?

KING: Yes, that is a different chair. This is a private chair.

JOKER [*regrets*]: Oh ... this is not *that* chair. This is a private chair of plastic. Let me sit then. [*He sits*]

The plastic chair breaks the aura and power of the chair and lowers the high [chair] to the material level. In the words of Bakhtin, this lowering of high to the sphere of earth symbolizes materiality (5).

Materiality in Performance Strategy

In the next sequence, all actors come on to the stage to marching tunes. They carry the tricolours (the Indian national flag) in their hands. They march and complete a full circle on the stage. They keep marching and dancing. The joker is the most visible character due to his inappropriate march and exaggerated facial expressions. A new young female impersonator, Sonu (a seven-year old), follows them. The method of learning through following is at work. The actors recite *śāyarī* (couplets) which I would like to put along with intonation of local language:

FIRST ACTOR: *E sakhi* (O dear friend!) (Referring to a female friend)

SECOND ACTOR: *Han sakhi* (yes, my dear!)

FIRST ACTOR: *Sarfarośī kī tamanna ab hamare dil mein hai,*

Dekhnā hai zor kitnā bazuen katil mein hai

(The desire for sacrifice is now in our hearts

We shall now see what strength,

There is in the boughs of the enemy).⁵⁸

CHORUS: Han han (Yes...yes) !

THIRD ACTOR: *(comes over to the mike and recites another couplet)*

Hindustān se dostī karoge to phulon kī mālā pahnaungī

Pakistān (ya Amerikā) se dostī karoge to kāt dungī

(Consider friendship with Hindustan (India),

And I will garland you

Consider friendship with Pakistan (or the USA),

I will cut you down to size)

OTHERS [*making a full circular movement on the stage*]: Yes...yes

[*Now the first actor comes over to the mike while others stay back,*

dancing to the rhythm of chorus]

FIRST ACTOR: *Sir pe hai topī dil mein hai īman[m]*

Aāp hi batatie is mehfil mein kaun hai Hindu kaun hai Mussalmān.

(They wear caps (taqiyah), and have honesty in their hearts

Pray, do tell if it matters who is Hindu and who is Muslim (in this gathering)

FOURTH ACTOR: *aur suno! sir par hai topi paḍhte hain Korāṇ*

Aāp bhī hain īnsan aur wo bhī hain īnsan

(Listen! They wear caps and read the Koran

(So what?) You are also a human being, and so are they

⁵⁸ This is a couplet by Iqbal (1877-1938), a nationalist poet and philosopher and important figure in Urdu and Persian literature.

THIRD ACTOR: *Āpas mein ṭakra jānā bāt bahut gandā hai*

Ham logon ke māthe par apnā tirangā jhandā hai

(Fighting among ourselves is bad.

We have our tricolour flag on our foreheads).

All these dialogues are delivered in the form of *śayarī* (couplets). Next, a full song is sung to the same energetic marching tune:

ALL [*in chorus*]: We are the revolution; the answer to all exploitation

We are the only hope of the poor, the workers and the martyrs,

Wake up! March on! We are the revolution

Come on! End this fight between the Hindu and the Muslim

Today, we need each other.

We are the revolution, the answer ... (*refrain*)

I bow to thee mother! Victory for mother India!

Hail the soldier, hail the farmers!]

How does one read this representation of patriotism, secularism and revolution in a subaltern performance? Patriotism and nationalism in dominant discourses come with prominent overtones of religion (particularly, religiosity against minority communities). But here there is an emphasis on communal harmony. The presence of lower-caste Muslim performers in the *Bidesiyā* further undercuts any space for that kind of religiosity. They also sing about a revolution for the poor, the workers and the farmers. After attending several such performances, I realised that the way these ideologies function in each performance is mainly a part of the performance strategy. This is further evidenced by the actors' and the manager's acceptance that it is not their lower-caste background perspective but their performance strategy that ultimately matters to them (Brahmdev Rai *Bidesiyā Party* Personal Interview 20 Oct. 2010). With regard to their performance strategy, *Bidesiyā* parties have to ensure that their performances please all tastes and

communities. As a part of the same strategy, they have included revolutionary songs, women's songs, the patriotic songs, item songs and even special scenes for children. They have included revolutionary songs because some of the areas they perform in have been a part of the revolutionary movement. Since these parties get generous tips from army personnel and police officers, they have some special songs for them too. With this professional responsive approach, the contemporary *Bidesiyā* cannot be directly said to be representing the agency of a class or caste-community.⁵⁹ However, in their very selection or in their performance of materiality in forms of language, body, jokes, the subaltern agency comes back. For instance, a *Bidesiyā party* might have selected some women's songs as a part of their performance strategy but by selecting the songs, it has also selected women's agency embedded in those songs. But such performance strategy leads to the ideological impurity. It is a mix of different strategies. We can observe the presence of narrative and strategic heterogeneity as the co-existence of multiple strategic semiotics in the popular performance of cultural labour. This [performance] strategy somewhere also implies materiality of the performance of cultural labour. As Law and Mol puts it, 'It [strategy] is a metaphor for thinking about the organisation of materiality' (283)

Materiality in Labour

Most of the *Bidesiyā* artists are agricultural and contractual labourers. Some of them have small pieces of land. As the performances take place only seasonally (at the most, only two to three months in a year), they cannot depend entirely upon these performances for their livelihood. 'Performance is our passion rather than profession,' confides an artist. 'Now-a-days at least we have some money paid to the artist, at the same rate as that of a worker, but earlier we used to perform even without the money'. They claim that they chose the *Bidesiyā* because it was their passion and to get some

⁵⁹Sarkar-Munshi sees it as a responsive approach which is important for patronage. She suggests that responding to the 'ideal' survival scenario has brought about many such re-adjustments ('Discussion').

fame: ‘We are recognized by the people of at least 5-10 districts.’⁶⁰ Unlike other performers, who may feel ashamed of their profession, most of the *launḍās* whom I talked to, are proud of their profession. According to their life stories, the passion for *nāc* was so strong most of them ran away from home at a tender age in order to become a *launḍā*. Most artists seem to wilfully opt for this profession—a profession to perform despite becoming infamous many times. A reporter writes about Sitaram Paswan, an artist who had once worked in the party of Bhikhari Thakur and survives by begging on the streets:

From childhood, he had a likeness for singing and dancing.

When he was around 12 years old he had seen a performance of Bhikhari Thakur’s *Bidesiyā* party at the house of his mother’s father.[...] He had wished to join Bhikhari Thakur’s party and come with him to his village. Gradually he started singing, dancing and performing with his party. (Saurabh)

This story is a familiar one. At the same time, the *launḍās* also accept that earning a livelihood is no less important. Going back to the detailed survey conducted by Imam and Kalapura (2009), mentioned earlier, it is estimated that while 46.1 per cent of the *launḍās* have taken up the *Bidesiyā* as their profession for their own livelihood, 41.8 percent have chosen it because of their passion for it. Imam and Kalapura, therefore, conclude that livelihood is the main reason. But it is difficult to differentiate between livelihood and passion, thus, in fact, both matter for them: ‘If one thinks that we have chosen this profession merely for livelihood, then we had other better choices too. We could have earned better if we had migrated to Delhi’ (Brahmdev Rai Party Personal Interview 20 Oct. 2010).

⁶⁰ I found that my village is recognized by the name of a big landlord or by the name of a popular *launḍā*.

Materiality in Reception

In a subsequent scene, an orchestra artist presents an acrobatic dance on a movie song. With a screen on the back, a mesmerizing dance sequence leads to an evocative response from the audience. As I have pointed out earlier, children and young men are the most expressive groups, immediately reacting to the performances. The audience, in general, gives varied responses depending on gender, age groups, social background and interests. The response also depends upon the particular sequence and scene of *Bidesiyā*. In general, the women are the most silent and serious spectators of the *Bidesiyā* who stay on for the longest time and give their reactions in their private (women's) sphere. Old people like the narratives based on legends. They do not like the new changes at all; they also believe that contemporary *Bidesiyā* lacks in overall quality. Kailash Rai (aged 90), a *Bidesiyā* enthusiast, offers some serious criticism:

Earlier performers had a good sense of scale, rhythm and music. The songs used to be situational. [...]The *ustad* had good knowledge of art and the artists were well trained. [...] Now if people have money they buy some instruments and start a party. [...] The popularity of the *Bidesiyā* has declined.

Old people also do not like the technological innovations used in *Bidesiyā*: the use of microphones and new instruments, which, to them, just adds more noise. Hemant Paswan of the Brahmdev Rai party rejects such criticism (Personal Interview 20 Oct. 2010). He says that we cannot remain stuck in an age; change in *Bidesiyā* is a demand of the changing times. According to him, new musical instruments and technology have rather strengthened the performances.

The levels of participation in a performance are stronger if the village is farther away from the cities and the national highways. For example, most of the 'backward' villages (in terms of education and contact with the mass media) have a greater number of

women audiences (almost 40-50%). The participation of women is greater in the lower-caste dominated villages and much less in the upper-caste dominated villages and also wherever there are chances of caste-village conflicts. The socio-political movement also marks the participation of audiences; the party and its artists have better respect and popularity in those areas where the Naxalite (Maoist) movement has been strong. In these areas, the participation of women is also significantly better (also confirmed by Immam and Kalapura 2009). In addition, according to Immam and Kalapura, around 89.4 percent of the artists accepted that they received a great deal of love and affection from the audiences, especially from the Dalit communities (55). Some of them (around 10%) admitted that on a few occasions they were insulted by the dominant castes.

8. Conclusion

From Bhikhari Thakur to Padarth Rai and Lagandev Paswan, the *Bidesiyā* has gone through a long journey. Despite several changes, contemporary *Bidesiyā* continues to entertain the same society: the society of the small peasants, agricultural labours, migrant workers and the lower-castes. While the urban middle-class questions the existence of the *Bidesiyā* and has declared it to be a dying art, which needs to be rescued, older generations from rural areas believe that the overall popularity and quality of the *Bidesiyā* performance has declined. Younger generations are of the opinion that the *Bidesiyā* has made a comeback. The *Bidesiyā* parties themselves claim that their popularity is increasing day-by-day, with good money and good respect as well as better prospects for the artists. People like us might wonder that in the age of mass media, what could be the future of the *Bidesiyā*? *Bidesiyā* parties are not worried about their future; on the contrary, they appear to be quite confident. They believe that television, CDs, DVDs, cinema and the internet will not bring about any disastrous changes. *Bidesiyā* artists told:

Earlier, we used to wonder who would listen to our songs when the radio came and then we thought that cinema might ruin our art and later, some people told us that the VCDs, CDs and DVDs were definitely going to throw us out. They have come and gone. We are still here dancing to the tune of the *Bidesiyā*' (Paswan Personal Interview 7 Nov. 2010).

The performance of contemporary *Bidesiā* often becomes a site of contestation between 'a culture characterised by a combination of new feudal values with the most reactionary aspects of bourgeois ideology' and the performance strategies of the lower-orders (Manuel 153).

CHAPTER IV

GENRE AND IDENTITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL LABOUR: THE STORY OF *REŚAMĀ-CUHARMALA*

1. Introduction

It was June 19, 1978, near the Daudnagar of Aurangabad district of Bihar; a marriage party arrived at the house of Nonu Sahu in the village of Ekauni. A *Nautāṅkī* (dance-drama) was being performed in the village ground. The love scene of Reshma and Chuharmal had just started when a bullet was fired, from amongst the spectators, which penetrated the chest of the actor playing the role of Chuharmal. Someone shouted at the top of his voice: *Ee bak-bak band karī re sār* (Stop this nonsense)! There followed a stampede among the spectators [*sic*]. (Narayan *Documenting Dissent* 24)

The scene that Badri Narayan narrates above is neither a Bollywood drama nor a spect-actor's radical intervention. Actually, it describes a violent attack against the enactment of a play called *Reśamā-Cuharmala*. *Reśamā-Cuharmala*, like *Romeo and Juliet*, is a popular love epic from Bihar set in a feudal background. It tells the story of Reshma (*Reśamā*), the daughter of a feudal landlord belonging to the dominant *Bhūmihār* caste, an upper-caste and Chuharmal, a cowherd and warrior belonging to the lower-caste *Dusādh* (a Dalit) community.⁶¹ The legend of Chuharmal has always been so popular that in fact it has attracted folklorists and scholars from the colonial period onwards. Older

⁶¹ The *Bhūmihār* caste traces its lineage from Parshuram, a legendary figure. According to a myth, when the terror of the *Kṣatriya* or the *Rājaputa* (the warrior caste) crossed all limits, then Parshuram raised an army of Brahmins in order to destroy them. These Brahmins were called '*Bhūmihārs*' (Narayan 33). *Bhūmihārs* are the most dominant caste in Bihar with traditional landholdings, and a strong presence in politics and education. They claim to be a martial as well as priest caste. *Dusādh* is a Dalit caste whose traditional occupations range from pig-rearing and agricultural labour to the attendants of landlords.

studies include the accounts of folklorists like George A. Grierson (1882), William Crooke and Ram Garib Chaube (1894), Mahadev Prasad (1938), Nageshwar Prasad (1967) and Samprati Aryan (1971). In addition, the recent scholarly writings on *Reśamā-Cuharmala* include Badri Narayan (2001), Sarah Beth (2005), Hassan Immam and Josh Kalapura (2009). For several decades, this particular story has been a bone of contention between the upper-castes and lower-castes in the south Bihar region. Performances based on the lower-caste versions have led to several caste atrocities and caste wars in Bihar.⁶² Narayan documented at least four caste riots in the south Bihar (then central Bihar) region between 1970 and 1990, centring on this narrative (24).⁶³

Narayan further reports on the above-mentioned event that the bullet was fired by a *Bhūmihār* youth, and that sparked the formation of two rival groups in the village. One group was led by the *Bhūmihār* and the other comprised the lower-castes [namely, *Dusādhs* and *Chamārs* (Dalits) and *Baniās*, *Koīris* and others (Backward Castes)] (24-25).⁶⁴ It should be noted, that in Indian caste-based feudal society, asymmetrical love is seen as one of the biggest offences, particularly when the male belongs to an untouchable (Dalit) caste and the female belongs to an upper-caste. Many caste atrocities in the past have resulted from the belief that Dalit boys were ‘flirting’ with, or having liaisons with upper-caste girls (Omvedt ‘Caste in India’). This is the reason why *Bhūmihārs* take the story of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* as an insult to their social status, while *Dusādhs* and other lower-castes see it as a symbolic victory over the upper-castes. On several occasions, Chuharmal as a hero has become a rallying point for the lower-castes groups.

⁶² The assertion of the lower-castes, particularly Dalits, led to the formation of caste *senās* (caste-militia) by the dominant castes. These caste *senās* are also known as community warriors. Though community warriors were not new in a feudal society, the dominant caste *senās* emerged most prominently when the Maoist-led (i.e., Naxalite-led) lower-castes, also called the *Lal sena* (red army), started fighting for dignity and rights.

⁶³ The number would have possibly increased between 1990 and 2001, when caste wars in Bihar reached another height because of regular clashes between the upper-caste *senās* and Naxalites. I came to know about more such riots, but the incidents could not be verified.

⁶⁴ This incident was named the Ekauni *Kāṇḍ*, based on the name of the village where it took place. *Kāṇḍ* usually denotes a specific event or chapter in a traditional text, but in the local context, it refers to an unpleasant incident like death, murder, theft, etc.

Historically, south Bihar has been a region of ruthless caste exploitation: existing in forms of *kāmias* (bonded labourers), forced labourers, and sexual exploitation of women of the lower-castes (A. Kumar *Community Warriors* 26). This exploitation and harassment of lower-caste women was further institutionalized through systems like the *Ḍolā-prathā* (or *Ḍolā* system). It was a system of bondage, in which every newly wed woman had to be sexually initiated by the upper-caste village landlords (Lal 23-24). According to Bharti, these were the extra-economic methods devised by the feudal lords to continuously remind those lower in the rank (caste, class and gender hierarchy) of their *aukāṭ* [social status] (Bharti qtd. in Lal 24). The *ḍolā-prathā* continued in many parts of Bihar until it was finally curtailed by the Naxalites in the 1970s and 1980s (Chandra 37). Though the assertion of the lower-castes has challenged many of the old practices, caste oppression and social discrimination continue to exist in many forms.

The epic of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* is enacted in several folk genres, ranging from printed text to performance. It has found its way into ritual worship (like the *Bhūmi-pūjā* celebration), women's songs, gossip, ballads, theatrical forms, and political speeches: assuming a legendary status. The story is also printed and circulated as booklets and distributed in Dalit *melās* (fairs) as part of consciousness-raising campaigns. With the emergence of Dalit identity, as Sarah Beth puts it, Dalit *melās* across India have become an important site of the public performance and dissemination of Dalit cultural identity ('Dalit Mela' 398). Most of these folk genres come together, coexist simultaneously in Dalit *melā*, and they are performed side by side with other folk genres. They are performed without diminishing their particular aims, contexts and styles. Often, the synthesis of these genres gives a new meaning to identity, performance and space.

A.K. Ramanujan views this coexistence of genres as a part of intertextuality—the interplay of different genres within a system (*Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas* 493). This 'intertextuality' helps in understanding narrative genres of a cultural unit (e.g., family,

caste, village and so on) in relation to each other (Ramanujan 517). Thomas de Bruijn has pointed out that while pre-modern literary genres were dialogic or ‘intermediary’ by nature, modern genres have created artificial division (qtd. in Orsini *Before the Divide* 13). However, in the case of the performance of cultural labour, intertextuality has remained an important feature. This generic question also becomes important in terms of social identity because in a segregated Indian society, an artistic genre is the product of a social group, which a caste-community develops over time (D.V. Rao Personal Interview 27 Dec 2010). In other words, an artistic genre, in general, represents a social identity. We have already discussed some of these factors in the chapter on the *Bhūmi-pūjā*. Ramanujan claimed that gender is a genre in Indian folk performances (Ramanujan *A Flowering Tree* 218). This formulation can be extended to other social identities and performance genres. This intertextuality also challenges the ideas of linear development of theatrical performances—from ritual to theatre.

However, the artistic genre representing a social identity transgresses in performance. Drawing from the narratives and performances of *Reṣamā-Cuharmala* and a genre-by-genre analysis of the characterisations of Chuharmal in the performance, I argue that for an oppressed community representation is a matter of performance strategy rather than a political choice based on political correctness. In other words, questions of representation in the performance of cultural labour cannot be separated from issues of survival (Rege 2002). This does not mean that performance strategy is not determined by politics. In fact, performance strategy is a conscious choice within the controlled choices, which determines the transgression of genre and identity. This chapter examines the transgression of genre and identity as part of the performance strategy of a marginalized community. It shows how the *Dusādhs* as a marginalized caste used all possible performance strategies in their performance despite several restrictions. Such performance strategies can be identified as subversive, radical and conformist. It is

because they not only perform under certain constraints but also ally with certain interests; therefore the performance of identity becomes somewhat paradoxical. The performance of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* not only shows the paradoxical nature of identity but it also reveals the paradoxical nature of such performance genres.

Broadly, this chapter attempts to study the performance of lower-caste identity on the line of performance of class (Willis 1977), ethnicity (Moerman 1974), gender (Butler 1990; Mendoza-Denton 1996) and sexual identity (Queen 1997). Such insights have rarely been applied to caste identity. Through a study of the performance of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* and the performative image of Chuharmal, I examine how a marginalized caste (e.g., *Dusādh*) performs its identity as part of a performance strategy. We will see why Chuharmal as a cult figure of the *Dusādh* caste sometimes merges with upper-caste deities and on other occasions refuses to merge and stands as their opposite. So what is in dispute basically is not identity, but the way identity is performed by a subaltern group—for survival and resistance, or what Scott calls the ‘subsistence requirements’ in day-to-day struggles and ‘to a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history’ (*Domination* xvii). The question is why does performance strategy become so important in folk performances? First, in such a society, discourses are still in flux, that is, not very rigid and referenced. Reinelt argues that when ‘discourses are in flux, then political struggles exist at various sites of contestation’ (Reinelt ‘Politics of Discourse’ 201). In a fragmented society, the point can also be the other way around, since political struggles exist at various sites, the discourses are in flux. In this chapter, I explore the way genre and identity is performed in flux. The chapter, while recognizing the radical potential of these performances, also shows the limitations of essentialized identity-based politics, which tend to become conformist.

2. Performing Identity: To Perform or not to Perform

On the night of 18 June 2010, I witnessed a rather disconcerting event. A *Bidesiyā* party had arrived to perform in a *Dusādh* community wedding ceremony, which was being held in a field bordering two villages, Dakhin-tola and Purvi-tola (Mokama Block) of the Patna district.⁶⁵ While Dakhin-tola has a mixed caste population with a significant number of *Dusādhs*, Purvi-tola is primarily dominated by *Bhūmihārs*. After performing prayers and entertainment songs, it was time to decide the *khelā* (play) of the night.⁶⁶ So, the joker/narrator of the party asked the people assembled there, ‘Which play should we perform today?’ The audience shouted back a variety of options: *Reśamā-Cuharmala*, *Ālhā-Udal*, *Kauwā-Hakni*, *Śīt-Vasanta* and others. The joker laughed, ‘Hahaahahehee! So, you people want to see all of them tonight. What an idea! Then book our party for ten days and we will perform them all.’ ‘I want one name,’ he reiterated, ‘which one?’ Again, many names echoed, but the majority of voices seemed to support *Reśamā-Cuharmala*. The joker asked a third time to make sure. Now, the audience narrowed the options down to *Reśamā-Cuharmala* and *Ālhā-Rudal*. The reasons for this choice primarily rested in the composition of the audience, mainly belonging to the two major castes: *Dusādhs* (Dalits) and *Yādavas* (Backward Castes).⁶⁷ In addition, as most of the performers were *Dusādhs*, the artists too showed their interest in performing *Reśamā-Cuharmala*. At the same time, I saw some elderly members walk towards the stage and engage in a discussion with the *Bidesiyā* party’s artists. Gradually, the stage was surrounded by a thick crowd. As I ran to see what was happening, I realised that the elders of the *Dusādh* community were not in favour of performing *Reśamā-Cuharmala*. They were trying to convince the party that performing *Reśamā-Cuharmala* would not be safe. However, the youths were not ready

⁶⁵ The block and the districts remain the same but the names of the villages are changed for ethical reasons.

⁶⁶ In local language, people generally ask, ‘*Kaun sā path khela hai ho?*’ (Which text are they performing?).

⁶⁷ An entertainment party taking suggestions from an audience does not mean that it does not have any role in selecting the play. If the artists do not want to stage a particular play, they simply say that they are not ready or make any other excuse. *Ālhā-Rudal* is claimed by *Yādavas* in this region as their caste legend.

to give up, as it was a matter of caste-pride and the assertion of identity for them (*jāt ke izzat ke sawāl hai*). *Izzat* (pride) works both ways here—for the upper-castes; it is the feudal caste pride, while for the lower-castes it is the matter of assertion. They tried to convince and assure the elderly members that no mishap would happen. After a while, though some of the youths seemed to support the elders' argument and vice versa, the confrontation within the community members grew. The joker and artists remained as mute spectators and the performance extended beyond the stage. A heated dialogue ensued between the young and the elderly members:

AN OLD MAN [*aggressively*]: Listen, we are not well prepared. If something (indicating caste riots) happens, then [perhaps *what will we do* or *who will take the responsibility?* (I could not hear the dialogue)]. Why don't you people try to understand this?

A YOUNGMAN: You people [elders] are cowards. Why don't you people go and hide somewhere. We are sick of you people. This is why they (indicating dominant castes) keep abusing us.

THE OLD MAN: You don't know anything. You don't understand that the times are not in our favour, the social situation is so bad already. See, we don't want to invite a clash on this auspicious occasion [of marriage].

ANOTHER YOUNG MAN: See (*pointing fingers at the old man*), if there is a performance, it will be of *Reśamā-Cuharmala*, otherwise, there won't be any performance tonight. Come on...Listen (*to the young*), we will not allow other any play to take place.

THE YOUTHS [*in chorus*]: Yes! We will not allow any other play to take place.
Huu...hooo [*hooting*]!

ANOTHER OLD MAN [*convincing the other elderly person*]: Let them do the play, if they are not listening [...] what we can do?

As the situation worsened, the aggressive elder calmed down and tried to convince the aggressive youths. With folded hands, he requested them to take their seats, understand the situation and not be obstinate. His sincere request did work, and the young members calmed down. The group was told to perform any other play except *Reśamā-Cuharmala*. At this point, some of the youths left the field in anger criticizing the elders. After almost forty minutes of disruption, the party staged *Sanki Rudalā* (Crazy Rudalā), an episode from the epic story of *Ālhā-Rudal*. I was told that the elders were not ready for any kind of confrontation on the auspicious occasion of a marriage. They were worried that performing *Reśamā-Cuharmala* might create unnecessary tension with the upper-castes. The reason being: though the upper-castes in the region generally do not turn up to watch these performances, they do mind if the performances or the comments seem to hurt or go against the sentiments of their caste or social pride. However, they do not mind if the lower-castes perform the ballads and theatre of the upper-castes.

Beth argues that for the Dalit community, ‘marginalization has habitually meant being denied the right to perform and right to watch the performances’ (‘Dalit Mela’ 398). However, ‘the right to perform’ and the ‘right to watch the performance’ do not matter to each performance and performance spaces. Some genres and spaces appear to be unimportant from the point of assertion of identity. They play a negligible role in the struggle of identity but their role cannot be completely undermined because it creates a community-solidarity, which helps in strengthening the performance of assertion. For instance, though the performance of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* in the *Bhūmi-pūjā* form is not directly related to the assertion of identity, the journey from the ritual to theatrical space is not a disjointed journey—the journey gives a consolidation to the caste-community. Hetherington has specified that identity, apart from being about identification and organization, is also about spatiality (105). The formulation that ‘identity involves identification with a particular space’ only applies to the sphere where the struggles of

opposites meet to assert their power and identity. Hetherington rightly points out that only ‘certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity’ (105). At the same time, no sites or genres can be exempt from their contribution in the formation of identity simply because the genres are connected with genres and the spaces with spaces.

The question that arises is where to locate the elements of identity in a performance? In other words, what needs to be performed to assert an identity? The question may provide us with a background to understanding the formation of identity in the performance of cultural labour. Otherwise, we will end up declaring that lower-caste cultures are just emulations of upper-caste culture. Narayan demonstrated that one can find traces of subaltern identity-consciousness of the narrator in ‘the words, metaphors and in the entire imaginative structure of a story’ (Narayan *Documenting* 15). On the other hand, according to Narayan, by creating and telling the stories, communities form their identities too (‘Women heroes’ 15). Added to this is the central question: Why is an identity or genre performed in a certain way? What does this performance say of identity beyond the ‘pre-political act’ or ‘pure-political act’? I would like to explore these questions in reference to a performance of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* in the next section.

3. Acts of Transgression

Parshuram Sharma Bidesiyā Nāc Party at Bakarganj, Patna

A Subaltern with a Turban

The performance of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* begins.⁶⁸ The *ustād* (leader) of the party announces the play. He compares the love story of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* with other famous love stories: *Hīr-Rānjhā*, *Lailā-Majnu*, *Shīrin-Farhād* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Following the format of *Bidesiyā*, the main protagonists Chuharmal and Ajabi Singh, brother of Reshma, sing prayer songs and introduce them. Chuharmal is the son of Biharimal a

⁶⁸ The analysis is based on the performance Parshuram Sharma Bidesiyā Nāc Party at Patna on 30 May, 2011.

famous *khalifā* (here, wrestler) from the Anjani village of Mokama.⁶⁹ Ajabi Singh is the son of a local king (the biggest landlord family) of the same region: Chuharmal's village falls under his jurisdiction. Chuharmal and Ajabi Singh claim to be good friends. They went to the same *pāthśālā* (traditional school) and had the same guru. Thus, both are friends as well as *gurū-bhāī*. Following his father's legacy, Ajabi Singh looks into the court affairs and is the defactoking. On the other hand, Chuharmal looks after his cattle and runs an *akhāḍā* (training centre) for local wrestlers. While Ajabi Singh wears a royal dress, Chuharmal is dressed like a member of an upper-caste family. He wears a turban, has a sword in his hand and a *tīkā* (vermilion mark) on his forehead. But why is Chuharmal, an untouchable, wearing the ritual dresses of an upper-caste? Should not Chuharmal, as a subaltern, or what Blackbrun calls a 'folk hero,' be wearing some subaltern dress—maybe a loincloth? The dress seems to suggest his status as a *Kṣhatriya*. Chuharmal also claims to be a devoted worshipper of the goddess *Durgā* and unlike Ajabi Singh who is also a worshipper of the same goddess; Chuharmal claims that he is blessed by the special grace of that goddess. There is no reference to caste; in fact, Chuharmal is wearing all the ritual dresses and claiming all the powers, which are commonly denied to Dalits in their day-to-day lives. One can read this image *from* the vantage point of a simplistic logic of emulation of upper-caste culture by a lower-caste, or what Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, called Sanskritization.

Sanskritization, according to M.N. Srinivas (1952), is the process through which the lower-castes adopt, assimilate and gain social legitimacy by emulating their upper-caste counterparts. Srinivas suggested that in the process of modernization, the upper-castes emulate western culture, while the lower-castes emulate upper-caste culture. Using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and Scott's idea of everyday protest, T.K Oommen

⁶⁹Mokama is a small city, municipality and a block in the Patna district of Bihar, situated on the bank of the Ganges. It is difficult to say whether Anjani was a village or small town because Anjani is referred as *śaharīā* which stands for a village, town and for a locality.

(1995) instead sees Sanskritization as a protest in their everyday lives by the lower-castes, particularly, untouchables. It is imbued with a spirit of protest, holding that ‘what you can do, we too can do; or we will live as we prefer, who are you to stop it’ [*counter-strategy*]? Oommen notes that such ‘protest behaviours were objected to by the upper-castes, particularly when the sanskritising castes were untouchables’ (*Alien Concepts* 182). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the performance of this identity gives an ‘equal footing’ to an untouchable caste. The very claim of an equal footing, despite all the ideological problems associated with it, gives caste hierarchy a counter-narrative. This ‘equal footing’ in performance provokes the dominant-caste group more than the ‘subordinate’ or ‘subversive’ images, particularly in a case where the performance of subversion becomes stereotypical and derogatory and loses its radical potential.

Ajabi Singh informs his sister Reshma that his best friend Chuharmal will be visiting him. Since Chuharmal is his best friend, he asks Reshma to make the best arrangements under her own supervision. Reshma follows her brother’s advice. Meanwhile, in his *darbār* or *dalān* (an area adjacent to the house, used exclusively by males), Ajabi Singh is eagerly waiting for his friend. Chuharmal comes; both friends shake hands and greet each other with a ‘*Ram-Ram dost!*’ (Greetings my friend!).⁷⁰ Again, there is no sign of caste and class biases distinguishing Ajabi Singh and Chuharmal. From the *darbār*, Ajabi Singh invites Chuharmal inside his home (the domestic space). In day-to-day practice, even now, Dalits are commonly not allowed inside upper-caste homes. They are either, given raw food or served food at a *dalān* in a separate queue. But in this theatrical representation, Reshma herself, not even any other female servant, serves him food. These are signs of an intimate friendship with and a special treatment for

⁷⁰*Rām-Rām* is used as courteous expression to greet people. Possibly the *Ārya-Samāj*, a Hindu social reform group active in this region, would have popularised this expression; however it is not used now.

Chuharmal.⁷¹ The sequence can be read as a lower-caste's desire to behave like an upper-caste. At the same, it can be read, as a lower-caste's (an untouchable's) desire to be treated with dignity and equality. In both ways, the performance becomes a counter-narrative.

Act of Reversal

According to many interpretations, Chuharmal was so handsome that many women wished to marry him despite his low caste-class status. When Reshma, from a distance, sees Chuharmal talking to her brother, she cannot resist her feelings. It is love at first sight. Reshma offers food to Chuharmal. She constantly stares at him and behaves in a coy and 'lustful' manner. Since Chuharmal is a man of 'high moral standards', he does not like Reshma's 'low' act. Despite his objections, Reshma keeps teasing him. She puts her hand on his shoulder, takes his hand in her hand and leans against him. A morally upright Chuharmal reminds her not to behave in such a manner because he considers her a sister.⁷² What a role-reversal! In fact in the upper-caste interpretation of the story, Chuharmal is projected as a *Chor* and *Chuharā* (thief and robber), basically, a morally low person from whom upper-caste women need to be protected. What we can read from this interpretation is that besides subaltern symbols (e.g., deification, defiance, dissent), elite symbols are also used and 'appropriate' by a subaltern group to reverse the role and also to project themselves as equals or even as superior in representation.

But these elite symbols do not remain confined to representation, or what Oommen calls 'what you can do, I can also do'; but on occasion they get embodied. As a result, this assertion of identity of course at one level functions as a counter-narrative and produces a counter-discourse, but at the same time, it also produces a dominant narrative and strengthens the dominant discourse.

⁷¹ Even today in this region, intimate family and friends are invited inside the house and hosted by main women of the family.

⁷² The relationship between brothers and sisters is considered most sacred and moral, and people in this region do not consider marrying even in a distance-bound brother-sister relationship.

Chuharmal does not start eating until his friend joins him. He asks Ajabi Singh to come and eat from the same plate as his (again, a sign of intimacy and equality). In response, Ajabi Singh says, 'No problem, friend, I will join you if you want.' And both eat food from the same plate. Dumont (1970) argues that the hierarchy of caste is based on the notion of pure and impure. Upper-castes have to maintain a distance from lower-castes to preserve their purity, especially 'contact with biological matters like faeces, blood and saliva-polluted substances' (J. Parry 77). The question is, what does the *Dusādh* performers want to say through this act besides the 'desire to become an upper-caste'? This can also be read as a desire to share food and space with the upper-castes.

Act of Dreaming

Reshma is sleeping in the next scene. She is in a dream. Suddenly, Reshma feels uncomfortable and wakes up. She takes a broom and basket in her hands and starts sweeping the floor. In a big feudal household, this task is generally assigned to the lower-caste women. This behaviour is very unusual for a princess like Reshma. Her *bhaujī* (brother's wife) is dumbfounded seeing Reshma's 'lowly' act, one associated with a lower-caste. So what is this dream conveying? According to Freud, every dream is about wish-fulfilment and has an underlying meaning behind it (147-158). So, a Freudian analyst would say that this uncommon behaviour of Reshma, in which she does the work associated with lower-caste women, shows her love for a lower-caste man. Freudian 'suppressed wishes,' which were difficult to express during her day-to-day routine, came to her in the form of a dream. Still recovering from the shock, Reshma's *bhaujī* throws the basket and broom from her hands, and asks, 'Why did you do this Reshma?' [As if she has committed a sin]:

BHAUJī: What has happened to you, o dear Reshma?

Why have you a broom and basket in your hand?

O dear princess! What makes you sweep the floor?
 You had three hundred sixty attendants, O Reshma!
 But tell me why you did this, why?
 Why have you acted like *Cerīā* (lower-caste sweeper)?
 O dear Reshma, tell me the truth. [1]

Reshma first argues that she is a grown-up. In addition, if she does not learn this work now, she may be insulted in her husband's house after marriage. By switching from a princess to a common woman, who after marriage is supposed to do all this work and is supposed to learn this work before marriage, Reshma transgresses herself to the labouring lower-caste women in the audience.⁷³ As the king plays between the past and the present in *Bidesiyā* (discussed in *Chapter 3*), Reshma plays between a princess and a common woman. She switches back to being a princess and replies:

O *bhaujī*! While sleeping I saw a dream
 A very strange dream
 With a strong desire in my heart
 I desired to sweep the floor
 And I took the broom and started sweeping [2]

In love, Reshma is not feeling too well. She requests of her *bhaujī* that she be allowed to go to the Ganges to take a bath. While bathing in the Ganges serves ritual purificatory purposes, it is also seen as a sign of transgression. Charu Gupta notes that in nationalist discourses, the space of river *ghāts* (riverbanks) was supposed to be dominated by the lower-caste people, which was 'a place of excessive hooliganism with respectable Hindu women' ('their breasts were tugged, their jewellery stolen and low-caste Hindus, Muslims and native police ogled them') (C. Gupta 147). She noted that during the colonial period 'women bathing semi-nude in public *ghāts* were signs of shame, of being

⁷³ It also becomes a moral lesson for lower-caste/class women to learn this work before marriage.

uncivilized, of licensed misdoings in an open space' (C. Gupta 147). For all these reasons, Reshma is not allowed to go to bathe in the Ganges. Nevertheless, she is a princess; therefore, water from the Ganges is brought for Reshma to bathe in. The ritual bath does not cure her. Instead, Reshma develops a stronger longing for Chuharmal. At this point, Reshma transgresses many social boundaries.

RESHMA: O *bhauji*, from where are coming these sounds

Jorī, jhāl (cymbals) and *Mridāṅga* (drum)? ⁷⁴

From where is coming the sound of *Mohinī* flute?

Who is playing it so beautifully?

Hey *bhaujī*, tell me my heart is getting

Captivated by these beautiful songs and music

Tell me O *bhaujī* from where?

From where are coming these sounds of

Jorī, Jhāl and *Mridāṅga* [3]

BHAUJī: Why are you speaking like this, O Reshma?

Don't speak like this!

Your father will thrash you o Reshma

Your brother Ajabi Singh will kill you.

And they will stuff your dead body.

Don't ask these questions.

Never utter these things again.

Your caste people will make fun of you O Reshma!

People of the village and the town will laugh at you.

Don't speak *kubolī* (unpleasant speech)

O *Reśamā*, I warn you, don't speak like this again. [4]

⁷⁴This can be also connected to the chapter on *Bhūmi-pūjā* about how women from the upper-caste houses are not allowed to watch or hear the lower-caste ritual songs.

Bhaujī has to stop *Reshma* from taking interest in the songs of the lower-castes. Such songs were considered so obscene and captivating that upper-caste women would have abandoned their homes and married into low-caste households (C. Gupta 93). Though *bhaujī* is warning her to stay away, Reshma is getting more and more curious. Curiosity itself is a sign of transgression. She asks, ‘Why shall people laugh at me?’ She repeats, ‘Tell me from where are coming the sounds...?’ *Bhaujī* replies to the princess:

In the west of our house
 There is a village/city names Anjani
 The sounds of songs and music
 Are coming from there
 People there are playing
Jorī, Jhāl and *Mriḍanga*
 Sitting at Tulsi Inārā
 Chuhamal is playing
 The beautiful *mohinī* flute [5]

After hearing Chuhamal’s name, Reshma becomes more impatient. She transgresses further: she wants to hear the lower-caste songs and watch their performance, as she is not able to control her desire. *Bhaujī* warns her again about the consequences and reactions of her upper-caste society:

What [the hell] are you asking o Reshma?
 People will laugh at you
 And you will be so embarrassed
 So embarrassed that you’d rather die
Hansi-hansi mārto he na [6]

Reshma wants to go to the village of the lower-castes and return during the night, so that nobody will know. Her *bhauji* unwillingly agrees; and in a hush-hush manner, with the help of *bhauji*, she as a woman of upper-caste transgresses the caste boundary.

Act of Disguise

Disguised as a *panbharnī* (a water carrier woman), Reshma reaches the *Ināra* (village-well) of Chuharmal's village. She is looking for him. When she does not see him, she gets anxious and angry. And in her anger, she evokes *Indal/Inara Mātā* (the local deity of the village well) and *Indal Dev* (Indra, the god of rain) and urges them to wash away the village. The request is granted. It starts raining heavily. Chuharmal is sleeping at this moment. In his dream, he sees a woman who is actually his familial deity *Durgā*. She asks him to wake up and get ready as his village is going to be washed away by the rain. She also informs him that the rain has been called by Reshma and it can only stop if he goes to see her at the *Ināra*. The morally upright Chuharmal gets nervous, as his morality is being threatened by the presence of Reshma. He is very much aware of Reshma's 'lustful' feelings towards him. To be safe from Reshma, *Durgā* gives him a special *tegā* (sword). By using the *tegā*, he can disguise himself as anybody. He decides to disguise himself as a *kodhiā* (leprosy patient) and pass through the *Inārā*.⁷⁵ As soon as Chuharmal appears as a *kodhiā* there, the rain suddenly stops. However, Reshma is not sure about the real identity of the *kodhiā*. So, she asks him who he is and where he belongs. Chuharmal is confused about what to tell her and he says:

O *panbharnī*, I don't have any home

I don't belong to any land

I don't have any name and address, o *panbharnī*

⁷⁵*Kodhiā* here refers to leprosy patients who mostly beg for their survival. In India, like in many cultures, the social stigma associated with leprosy has been very strong; it was traditionally believed that leprosy was a divine punishment. The socially stigmatized patients were segregated and had to survive by begging.

I don't have parents
 They died when I was just a child
 Since childhood, I have leprosy
 And I survive only by begging [7]

He further says he is feeling thirsty and asks for water. Reshma readily agrees but Chuharmal refuses and says, 'Before taking water from your hand, I should know who you are, which village and caste you belong to? If you belong to Hindu *kula* (family), I will accept water from you and if you are from *achopinkulā* (outcaste), I will not accept it. Tell me the truth.' Reshma discusses with her servant that if the *kodhiā* is asking about her caste, then he must belong to a good family and have a good caste background (because only a person from a good family and caste background can ask such a question). She, nonetheless, tells him her true caste and family background. But, Reshma's suspicion of the *kodhiā*'s disguised identity grows further and she in turn asks him to tell the truth by swearing on his guru. Now, Chuharmal is not left with any option except to tell the truth and so, he says:

Anjani Shaharia is my village o *panbharnī*
 My father's name is *Bihari Lal khaliḥā*
 Name of this body is Chuharmal o *panbharnī*
 [And he gets transformed back to his real form] [8]

Peter Brand gives an interesting insight into the performance of disguised identity. He shows different ways in which disguise as a technique functions in identity. He says one can create a specific spurious identity by changing the dress and appearance and thus by concealing identity (Brand 69). According to him, one can conceal things other than identity by a change of dress and appearance (such as class, past history, intentions, bank balance, etc.) and one can confuse others about one's identity, intentions (basically, theatrical) (69-70). Thus, what we see in the above scene of *Reśamā-Cuharmala* can be

classified as the changing of dress and appearance to conceal identity; simultaneously, it also shows that one cannot conceal one's actual caste identity by merely changing one's dress and appearance.

Act of Domination

In the struggle of opposites, as pointed out earlier, besides many other strategies, subaltern groups also use the language of the elite. Not surprisingly, morality and chastity also become the language of assertion of identity. In the context of *Reśamā-Chuharmala*, Narayan succinctly remarks that 'the construction of the moral character of hero is based on the character assassination of the heroine' (*Documenting* 42). What follows next is the character assassination of the heroin to assert the lower-caste identity. Since the woman's body becomes the site of power- play, males from both sides unite in their language and performance to justify their domination over women. As soon as Reshma recognizes Chuharmal, she runs and clings to him. Chuharmal resists and requests Reshma to go back to her home.

CHUHARMAL: O sister! You go back home

RESHMA: O my beloved! Don't call me sister.

CHUHARMAL: O sister! Don't call me beloved! You are my *bahan*.⁷⁶

[*Reshma sobs and tries to convince Chuharmal*]

RESHMA: Because of you O *surma* (brave warrior)

Only because of you

I have left my family and mother

Because of you!

I have left my brother and father

Because of you

⁷⁶ Because she is a sister of his *guru-bhai*, Ajabi Singh, so in the relational chain, she automatically becomes Chuharmal's sister. Many times, a friend's sister is also considered a sister.

I have left my village and caste [9]

She then holds on to Chuharmal. And this time, she is very obstinate. She is not ready to give up. Chuharmal tries to convince her that he along with her brother will find a handsome husband for her. She is not convinced and announces her intention:

When I have already accepted you as my husband

Then why will you find a groom for me

I will only love you and

I will only marry you, O surma [10]

She goes a step further and asks what they are going to wear on the special day:

You get ready and wear the yellow dhoti

And take a ring of mango leaves

And I am going to wear the *chulhan* sari [*special sari for wedding*]

I will only and only love you [11]

Chuharmal again tries to convince her that he cannot marry her, because she is from a different caste. Reshma says that she will leave only when he assures her of his love, but he refuses, makes an excuse, and runs away. This behaviour of Chuharmal does not suit his claim of being a *Kṣatriya*, who is supposed to be strong, virile, and sexually potent. While a runaway bride is considered to be bold and strong at the expense of chastity, a runaway groom is considered an inferior man and *nāmard* (an effeminate).

The actions of Chuharmal can be interpreted in Fanonian language: where a black man [here a Dalit man] says, ‘I do not wish to be loved and I will flee from love-objects.’ This clearly shows the same tendency where Chuharmal’s act is what Germaine Guex calls, ‘putting oneself to the proof in order to prove something’ (Guex qtd. in Fanon *Black Skin* 75). The point exemplifies when Fanon writes: ‘I do not wish to be loved; I will adopt a defensive position. And if the love-object insists, I will say plainly, ‘I do not wish to be loved’ (75). But unlike the predicament of Jean Veneuse in Fanon, Chuharmal

cannot be said to be devaluating himself. Instead, this defensive position, on the one hand, stages a protest and on the other, makes him morally superior, which is a reflection of a very evaluative act. Reshma feels insulted and is furious. Failed in love, she returns home and makes allegations against Chuharmal. She provokes her brother Ajabi Singh:

O Brother, despite you being a king

I have been insulted

Your sister has being harassed

Chuharmal has torn my sari

He pulled out my *coli*

He has disrobed me of my *izzat* (honour), O brother! [12]

Ajabi Singh is not ready to accept such allegations against his dearest ‘moral’ friend Chuharmal. But when Reshma insists, he announces an economic blockade for Chuharmal’s village and community, which is a very normal punishment for the lower-castes. According to the announcement, nobody from the village Anjani is allowed to take their cattle for grazing to the fields of the Mokama area. Reshma herself oversees two of the king’s attendants executing the order. Chuharmal comes to know about this announcement. He feels very angry and asks his *bhānjā* (sister’s son), Buddhua, to go ahead and take the animals to Mokama for grazing. Buddhua tries to go, but is stopped by the king’s attendants. This leads to a fight between Chuharmal and the king’s attendants. Chuharmal kills both of them and to show his anger throws their bodies into the Ganges. The story of this incident spreads, as this is a big insult to the king, and it enrages Ajabi Singh. He says to Chuharmal:

I have treated you like my best friend and you returned it in this manner. First, you molested my sister and then you killed my two attendants. The way you have thrown the dead bodies only shows your growing arrogance. That cannot be tolerated.

While Chuharmal accepts Ajabi Singh's latter allegation, he dismisses the allegation of molestation. Instead, in a patronising manner, he asks, 'How could you believe such a 'low' allegation? You were my friend. And now tell me with what moral (or religious) duty did you announce the economic blockade?' Then in order to prove his righteousness, Chuharmal challenges Ajabi Singh to arrange *agni-parīkṣā* (trial by fire) for himself and Reshma: whoever is true (or chaste) would emerge unscathed from the fire. The king agrees and the sacred *agni-kund* (literally, well of fire) is prepared. *Reshma* is asked to undergo the *agni-parīkṣā*. Unlike the nationalist narratives of upper-caste women who for morality and truth would jump into the fire, *Reshma* is not ready for this examination of *satt* (truth). She frankly accepts that she wrongly accused Chuharmal and that it is she, who loves him. She repeatedly requests not to be subjected to *agni-parīkṣā*. This insults Ajabi Singh's feudal pride, which expects women to be the bearers of a moral and chaste image to uphold honour. Now, as it happens commonly, honour needs to be upheld even at the cost of 'human sentiments', 'values' and family love (Chowdhry 1997). Not only her love, but also Reshma needs to be sacrificed in order to maintain the honour of caste and community. Ajabi Singh orders Reshma to pass through the fire. Reshma runs towards Chuharmal for her love and life, making her final request:

O *surma* (brave one), start loving me even now

Save me, o *surma*

Save my *izzat* (here, dignity), o *surma*

Please don't let me die, o *surma* [13]

In a desperate attempt to save herself, she clings to Chuharmal in front of her brother. But, she is forced apart. Both are asked to go for *agni-parīkṣā*. Of course the 'moral', 'righteous' and 'dutiful' Chuharmal comes out unharmed and the 'lustful' and 'immoral' *Reshma* burns to death. The play ends. Males celebrate their morality and righteousness and all actors come together on the stage and sing: *Raghupati raghav rājā*

Rāma/patit pāvan Sītārām (O chief of the house of Raghu, Lord Rāma/ Uplifter of those who have fallen). Perhaps they want to invoke *Rāma* to clean the sinful acts of fallen women like Reshma, whose sexuality had become dangerous for society. Her ‘corrupted’ soul needs to be cleansed by Lord *Rāma*, the moral *puruṣa* (man) who himself subjected his wife to the fire ordeal to test her chastity. According to Chowdhry, this act is ‘grounded on the belief that like the social order, individual personality is also purified and lifted from a ‘lower’ to a ‘higher’ self by means of sacrifice’ (Chowdhry ‘Enforcing’ 1020-21). Before we jump to any conclusions, I would like to state that this is only one interpretation of *Reśamā-Chuharmala*, perhaps the most patriarchal one. I have selected it purposefully, as the version is more popular than other ‘subversive’ interpretations in which Reshma and Chuharmal equally love each other; run away from their families and are killed; or both love each other and marry. But what about the interpretation I have discussed above: why does a ‘subaltern caste’ like the *Dusādh* choose this interpretation in a theatrical genre?

‘Appropriating’ the Dominants

Chowdhry argues that the male repertoire [including folk drama] of songs is bawdy, comical, and entertaining at one level and deeply conservative and idealistic at the other (‘Lustful Women’ 26). There is no doubt that the play also incorporates lower-caste male patriarchal views. This point also becomes evident from the fact that this was a period of upward caste mobility, which, according to Charu Gupta, was highly influenced by the upper- and middle-class ideology. In the context of Bihar’s neighbouring state Uttar Pradesh, she notes:

This was a period of considerable upward caste mobility, combining claims to higher social status with the acquisition of wealth and economic power. Many inferior castes of UP, to

legitimise such claims were compelled to remodel their culture, leisure and entertainment. The conduct of their women loomed large in this context, renewing means and motives for the assertion of moral codes. Thus, for different reasons and from diverse perspectives, representative bodies of lower, intermediary and upper Hindu castes adopted similar resolutions. There were reformist motives and campaigns [also]. (91)

Due to some social advances largely due to the nature of their occupations, among the Dalits in Bihar, the *Dusādhs* were one of the front-runners of caste-based associations, struggles and reforms.⁷⁷ For instance, the *Bhartia Dusādh Sabha*, a caste-based association of *Dusādhs*, was formed in early 1915 and the *Dusādh* elite have regularly organized their caste conferences since then. Shaibal Gupta points out that the social movement of *Arya Samaj* found some following among the lower-castes ‘which acted more as a vehicle of conservatism rather of regeneration in Bihar’ (1497). Badri Narayan further supports the claim that some of the Magahi areas, from where this interpretation is taken, were under the influence of the *Arya Samaj* movement, which might have influenced this version of the play (53). Kathleen Gough (1987), in her study of south India, also pointed out the lower orders have reconciled to a Brahminical elaboration of the social structure which instilled a belief in *Karma*, *Dharma* and in other similar beliefs. Through these interpretations, we have again come back to the hegemony of the ruling ideology in which the ‘subaltern consciousness is primarily dominated by sediments of the ideologies of the elites’ (Gramsci paraphrased in Pandian PE 62).⁷⁸ What happens is

⁷⁷ Apart from being agricultural labourers, people of this caste worked as guards and gatekeepers for the upper-caste landlords and as watchmen, gatekeepers, table servants, cooks, bearers and grass-cutters for the colonial masters (Narayan *Documenting* 86).

⁷⁸ However, common sense is not completely regressive carrying only the elements of dominant ideologies, but it contains progressive, autonomous elements as well, which assert them when the subaltern classes act against the elite ‘occasionally’ and in ‘flashes.’

that in this logic of the hegemony of the ruling ideology, the existence of subaltern agency is completely denied and ultimately dismissed.

The common answer would be that the world of *Dusādh* women cannot but be dominated by that of the *Dusādh* males. This could be true to an extent, but what happens to Gramsci's 'good sense,' part of the 'common sense' (subaltern agency) which resists such assimilation?⁷⁹ And why does a marginal caste follow the hegemonic idea? The argument that the world of *Dusādh* women is dominated by *Dusādh* men somewhat reduces the agency of *Dusādh* women to a non-resistant and submissive agent. There is no doubt that agency here has a problematic presence but scholars ultimately go to the extent that they in one way or another make subaltern agency disappear. This applies to both cases: lower-caste agency as well as lower-caste women's agency.

4. (Re)enactment of Agency and Identity

Of course, no agency is outside of a power relationship but no agent (player) can be considered as not having agency. And if one group has agency, then the agency must be reflected somewhere, at least in 'flashes,' in 'hidden scripts'. The disappearance of agency makes me ask some basic questions: 'why' and 'where' did the agency disappear? While 'how' downplays the role of the other agency (subaltern agency), 'why' gives a scope where the socially marginalized agency or identity can be located, maybe beyond the performance spaces and events. The micro reading of the question 'why' in the play, amply demonstrates the reasons as to why *Dusādhs* have represented this identity in a social sphere. They perform the story in this particular way not simply because they have been dominated by Brahminical or elite ideology or, as Scott (1992) shows they exposed their real face backstage in a hidden transcript, but also because (in most of the cases) the representation served their interests in a system of relations. All three principles seem to

⁷⁹ Gramsci argues that common sense does not always follow the dominant ideology but it also has a 'healthy nucleus' (Gramsci 327).

work here. Firstly, for instance, the presentation of Chuharmal as a *Kṣhatriyas* and his upper-caste ritual dress is certainly determined because of the influence of upper-caste ideology among the lower-castes, which is also reflected in their daily lives. Secondly, Ajabi Singh is presented as a good friend, a man who keeps promises, a man of morality and religion. It is not him, but his sister who is immoral and low. This representation typically ‘avoids any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority’ (Scott *Weapons* xvii). We can read a carefully ‘calculated representation,’ even ‘conformity’ in hierarchical settings (Scott *Weapons* xvii). Thirdly, this assertion was part of a new identity that was beginning to emerge from the stereotypical ritual images and working proactively for full legal and social recognition, to benefit from the representative politics of the colonial and postcolonial systems (Narayan ‘National Past’ 3533; Charlsey 269). While vulnerability becomes the ground of political recognition, as Anupama Rao argues, it also ‘reproduces historical vulnerability’ of the subject, erasing the vitality of its own power (Rao 26). The *Kṣhatriyas* image of the *Dusādhs* helped them to free themselves from their earlier stereotypical and inferior image. The *Kṣhatriya* image also gives a way of assertion in a society where other images are not easily recognized and when democratic institutions are inefficient and in fact are a mechanism to support the dominant.

Dusādh women react in that way perhaps because in dominant caste perception, they were, usually, considered immoral and lustful, their boldness provoking the upper-castes and their patriarchal image of women. Of course, *Dusādh* or lower-caste working males also practise patriarchy in different forms. They may not believe in the chaste and moral ideal image for their women, but when it comes to labour exploitation and physical violence on women, they are not apart from the larger patriarchal social structure. In fact, it is in the interest of lower-caste males not to believe in ‘morality’ and not to ask their women to observe *pardah*; for them, not adhering to morality and domesticity is a crucial matter of for both labour exploitation and survival. However, viewed from discourses of

moral and chaste discourses, the gender relationship in subaltern and folk society looks very 'progressive' and non-hierarchical. The representation also needs to be read through the primary contradiction of a society, here not from the public sphere perspectives but from the perspective of the *Dusādh* community. In south Bihar, the contradiction is caste and labour, around which identity struggle is taking place.

However, the above discussion presents an objective space, 'a structure of objective relations which determines the possible forms of interactions and of the representation the interactors can have of them' (Bourdieu *Distinction* 244). Bourdieu urges a movement beyond this provisional objectivism:

[Provisional objectivism], in 'treating social facts as things', reifies what it displaces juxtaposed in a static order of discrete compartments, raising the purely theoretical questions of the limits between the groups who occupy them, are also strategic emplacements, fortresses to be defended and captured in a field of struggles. (*Distinction* 244)

Scott (1990) presents an account of villages in which villagers contradict themselves. He notes that 'the contradiction had a situational logic to them' (ix). Drawing from postmodernist discourses one can argue that there does not exist one essential identity; there are multiple identities. It is against this background that I intend to place the performance of *Dusādh* (Dalit) identity, which indeed exists as a historical experience. It is not because *Dusādhs* have multiple *Dusādh* identities but it is because one identity is performed in different ways.

As has been pointed out earlier, in an unequal society, identities in the form of the struggle of opposites exist at many levels: between upper and lower-castes, Backward Castes and Dalits, two Dalit castes, Dalit males and females. For example, a lower-caste identity is created as the result of its struggle with the upper castes. In a similar way, it is

quite evident that upper-caste identity has been (re)created against the lower orders. Both have evolved from each other. This interpretation leads us to a context in which genre and caste identity can be performed.

Elin Diamond posits that identity is not a birthright but rather a set of meanings and positions that are achieved and by implication, may shift over time (65). Contrary to this claim, if we look at caste-identity, we see that caste-identity is indeed a birthright (fixed by birth) in which an individual identity is ascribed by the person's birth. Although caste identity has shifted over time, it has maintained its major characteristics. As a system of hierarchy, it has created its horizontal performing zone in which each caste performs to maintain its status; not only the castes, which are in power, but also the castes that are below (Ambedkar *Vol.7*). It also is important to note that, as a part of socialization, the members of each caste are taught to accept their caste affiliation as inevitable and unchangeable, like their physical characteristics. Here one can argue that the factors, which help in maintaining caste-identity and caste hierarchy, are, in fact, responsible for people themselves believing caste affiliation to be unchangeable.

However, this can be one part of the performative problem because the caste system is about not only agencies and choices; it is also about the structure and the system that the dominant caste maintains through ritual, power, economy and state. Unlike the primordialist and pre-political thesis which presents caste system and identity as an essentially unchanging and immutable concept, 'caste identity is historically constructed, fluid and changing' (A. Kumar 15-16). In reality, identity has never been a changeless truth about a subject. In addition, I argue that identity was never as performative or at least as easy to perform as some scholars have claimed (Butler 1989). Social identity is not a coat or theatrical character which when worn causes identity to suddenly change.⁸⁰ More than face, identity, in the context of caste, is body; if it is fluid then it is also sticky

⁸⁰ A character can disguise an identity and similarly an identity can be also disguised in a character.

and durable. In the performance of ethnicity and identity, Moerman succinctly notes that ‘the work of producing identity involves both durable culture and the momentary contingencies of interaction’ (85).

This durability also creates a symbolic and material basis on which the efficacy of performance of genre and identity depends. The durability of identity and performance not only exist in memory and history but also on the marked, unmarked and markers of the performing body—in blood, on bone and on the twisted tongue. These durable elements become the site of memory and performance. This has been one of the reasons why, merely by changing roles, one cannot easily reconcile the oppressed identity that has already acquired its material base. For example, *Dusādhs* may perform a thousand times like those of the Brahmins or the *Kṣatriyas*, but they are still treated as *hīna* (low) in the social status (Narayan *Documenting* 31). My argument is that the repeated act in ritual, theatre and performance does not guarantee that one’s identity will be sanctified in a hierarchical power relationship in an unequal society. Furthermore, in a system of unequal relationships, the performance of identity is not merely about behaviour but it is also about the system of exploitation. The point is strongly made by Scott:

[Slavery, serfdom and caste subordination represent] an institutionalized arrangement for appropriating labour, goods, and services from a subordinate population. As a formal matter, subordinate groups in these forms of domination have no political or civil rights, and their status is fixed by birth. Social mobility, in principle if not in practice, is precluded. (Scott *Domination* xi)

If that is the case, then what is the point of performing an identity? For a marginalized group, says Diamond, ‘the identity politics is about survival and resistance’ (64). The emergence of a strong Dalit identity politics has placed Dalits in India in a safer position than that of Adivasis and Muslim minorities, who can be easily tortured and

killed. This performance of identity is, for a marginalized group, also about opportunities and interests, which though often used by the system to reinstate conformity, still have an efficacy and role in day-to-day struggles that cannot be undermined. To quote Scott, ‘Behind the facade of behavioural conformity imposed by elites, we find innumerable, anonymous acts of resistance; the two forms are inextricably joined in day-to-day struggle and identity’ (Scott *Domination* 67).

To illustrate and extend my point to the next level, I would like to give an example of a marginalized group that performs its identity beyond a pre-political or pure-political act: the *Gulgulia*. In fact, when I was thinking about writing on the performance of a marginalized identity, the image of a *Gulgulia* woman stuck me. *Gulgulia (Nat)* is an ostracised community of beggars, a vagrant gypsy tribe in India, which was traditionally engaged in performing arts.⁸¹ I remember when I was a child, a *Gulgulia* woman used to come to our village. She would ask for some food or grain. Usually she would not accept what the household would offer. Rather, she would place a certain demand (e.g., ‘I want five kilograms of grain’ or something like that). Initially, she would make a very humble request (e.g., sing a song). Then she would shower best wishes, mainly of longevity and prosperity, on the family members and pray to the gods for their blessings. However, if her demands were not met; she would start with a mild threat, mostly non-abusive and then resort to abusive language. This would commonly lead to a mutual exchange of abuses and small altercations, with members of households. She would even threaten to puke, piss, or shit at the door. I remember her saying that she would cut her own skin if her demand was not met. Even then, sometimes when the demand was not met, she would thoroughly abuse, curse the family, and walk away.

The performance strategy of the *Gulgulia* woman, in general, embodies the way a marginalized community in an extreme situation performs its identity. In other words,

⁸¹ They were engaged in rope dancing, jugglery, *kartab* (adventurous act), and *Nauṭaṅkī*. Their women were the traditionally performing women. *Nafs* were put on the list of criminal tribes by the colonial government.

marginalized groups, which may be struggling for survival and recognition, may use all possible strategies to free themselves from their socio-political marginality, which goes beyond the politics of right and wrong or secular and conservative. Though due to their class location and constraints on the right to perform, they commonly use subversive acts, they are not immune to other options. In a similar way, the *Dusādhs* as an oppressed caste use all acts ranging from a deified image of Chuharmal to a beautified image of Chuharmal in order to assert their claims.

5. Performance of Genre and Identity

I will illustrate here the various (at times contradictory) ways, using different genres, in which *Dusādhs* perform the image of Chuharmal to come out of marginality. The image of Chuharmal becomes interesting to explore the relationship between artistic genre and social identity. This is important because not all genres can perform all kinds of social identity and not all kinds of social identity are fit for all genres.

In Ram-Garib Chaube's collection of folklore (1894), Chuharmal is presented as a *Dusādh's* ancestral deity. In this performance, the *bhagat* (shaman) along with the *manariyās* (drummers) sing the glory of Chuharmal, who was a brave warrior from the *Dusādh* community and married to a Brahmin girl. After his unnatural death, he turned into a powerful spirit who could chase other evil spirits away (Chaube 62-63). This interpretation continues and still has a strong presence in the ritual worship of the *Dusādh* community. In the land-worship ceremony of the *Dusādh* caste, he is worshipped as an ancestral spirit. Even as an ancestral spirit, Chuharmal has many roles to play depending on spatiality. While at home and within the *Dusādh* community, he is projected as a benevolent spirit who takes care of the community; outside of the community, for example, in agricultural fields, he is projected as a malevolent spirit who if not worshipped or propitiated might get angry and take harsh revenge (e.g., uproot the grain

fields of big farmers). Both images work here: while at home, it gives the community solidarity; outside of the home, the dominant castes propitiate him because of his powerful and terrorizing image.

George A. Grierson documented Chuhamal as the first thief. He along with William Crooke portrayed Chuhamal in quite a negative light (Narayan 38). Narayan views this representation of a thief as a colonial bias against a marginalized lower-caste hero. There is some basis in this claim as in most cases the colonialists' interpretations tended to express colonial biases as well as caste biases. However, Chuhamal's image as a 'thief' was also collected by several other scholars including Immam and Kalapura (2009), where the portrayal of the thief is not in a negative light. According to such an interpretation, Chuhamal was working as an attendant to a king who did not pay him any wages. When he asked for wages, the king insulted him. To avenge this insult, Chuhamal decided to become a thief. He made a tunnel and stole all the jewellery of the king's daughter (Immam and Kalapura 102-105). While *Dusādh* narrators tell this narrative with a sense of pride, in both colonialist and upper-caste narratives the act of stealing is seen as 'low'. The image of *Dusādhs* was further criminalized when the *Dusādh* caste was defined as 'inveterate thieves' in the colonial act of 1871 (O'Malley 54). On the other hand, the 'heroic thief' image of Chuhamal continued to persist among the lower-castes of folk culture even as the *Dusādhs* tried to distance themselves from this image, which was becoming a basis for criminalizing their caste.

This image of Chuhamal can be described as what Blackburn calls folk hero or local hero.⁸² The 'folk hero,' as Blackburn says, 'protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the group devalues' ('Folk Hero' 131). In some interpretations,

⁸² Blackburn makes a distinction between the courtly hero or '*purāṇic* hero' and the 'local hero' or 'folk hero' because of their social class. This definition comes from the same logic that sees folk and local as a homogenous category. The folk hero protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the groups devalue (Blackburn 'The Folk Hero' 131). However, this definition of 'folk hero' or 'local hero' is problematized in the context of Bihar because a 'local hero' as community warrior also unleashes violence on the weaker sections. They do not always stand with the lower classes as Blackburn argues.

Chuharmal is projected as a social bandit who in line with Blackburn's description represents anarchy and violence to the privilege classes, but defiance and strength to the lower classes (Blackburn 'Folk Hero' 131). Chuharmal as a folk hero would harass the landlords by stealing their grain and cattle and help the lower orders. Of course, the landlords were not happy and after many attempts succeeded in beheading him. A large statue of Chuharmal without head is worshipped in a village named *Mor (Mokama)*. Blackburn, in his description, juxtaposes the folk hero with the paurānika hero. In the next section, we see that a folk hero easily becomes a paurānika hero. Thus, instead of giving any fixity, we need to take note of the changing configuration of power in which this image works.

Badri Narayan argues that in subaltern myth making, denial, defiance and deification are used as mechanisms to defend or assert (*Documenting* 58). Similar arguments are posed in Scott's studies of peasant society where he has used terms like foot-dragging, dissimulation, pilfering, feigned ignorance, sabotage, etc. as weapons of the weak. When *Chor* (thief) and *Chuhar* (robber) became terms to denigrate Chuharmal, then a section of *Dusādhs* claimed that Chuharmal was Chauharmala (literally, brave warrior). When the moral discourses of colonialism and the social reform movement become strong, the *Dusādh* community reacted by projecting Chuharmal as a moral *avatarī puruṣa* in the line of *Viṣṇu* and *Rāma*. Ramrakṣha Das in his booklet *Dusādh jāti kī Itihās evam Unkī Vibhūtiyan (The History of Dusādh Caste and Their Heroes)* has used his name as 'Baba Chauharmal' (brave warrior) instead of 'Baba Chuharmal'. The history of the *Dusādhs* is presented as *Rājapūta se Dusādh tak kī Dukhdāyī Yātrā* (the painful journey of an *Rājapūta* becoming a *Dusādh*). The interpretation is evident from the theatrical production I have mentioned.

In this interpretation, Chuharmal is projected as an extremely handsome and brave warrior. The names of the many women charmed by Chuharmal's beauty and bravery

appear abundantly in songs and ballads (Jirba Tamolin, a betelseller; Reshma, the princess; *Sonamatia*, a magician). By projecting Chuharmal as a warrior and the most handsome person, perhaps, the *Dusādhs* wanted to overcome the image of a grotesque (headless) Chuharmal. The image also seems to be a response to the atrocities and insult of the upper-caste males against the lower-caste women.

As Communist movements and later the Naxalite movement, became strong in this region, then Chuharmal emerged as a communist hero for the common lower-caste people. The slogans of the lower-caste Naxalite guerrillas fighting against the feudal landlords did not hail Marx or Mao but caste legends such as Chuharmal and Dina-Bhadri ‘Chuharmal *Bābā kī Jai*’ (Hail Chuharmal) and ‘*Dina-Bhadri kī jai*’ (Hail Dina-Bhadri). Since upper-caste private armies used to attack in the night, so throughout the night, *Dusādhs* along with other lower-castes would sing and perform Chuharmal and the songs of *Dina-Bhadri* (Immam and Kalapura 94-100).

With the emergence of lower-caste politics in the 1990s in the background of the Mandal movement,⁸³ Chuharmal was projected as a lower-caste hero. The then chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav, who emerged as a charismatic leader from a Backward Caste background went to inaugurate the fair of Chuharmal and sought his blessings. Chuharmal was projected as a symbol of social justice. He appealed, ‘O *Pasi, Dusādh, Kalwar, Chamar, Dhamar* brothers [Dalits and Backward Castes]! Remember Baba Chuharmal and defeat these upper-castes who think that a king always takes birth from a queen’s womb’ (Narayan 81). But when the internal political conflict started between LaluYadav, a Backward Caste-*Yadav* leader and Ram Vilas Paswan, a *Dusādh*-Dalit leader, then Chuharmal became a *Dusādh* hero. Narayan discusses in detail the

⁸³ The Mandal Commission was formed in 1979 to identify socially and educationally backward classes. The report of the Commission resulted in providing certain constitutionally mandated reservation policies for socially backward sections. It also led to the emergence of some elite leaders from Backward Castes.

struggles of both the leaders to appropriate *Chuharmal*. One of the main factors, which seemed to work in favour of Paswan was his *Dusādh* identity.

The rise of assertive Dalit politics has certainly contributed to Chuharmal being performed as a Dalit hero who fought against upper-caste landlords, feudalism, the exploitation of women and lower orders. He loved and married a Brahmin girl, Reshma, and upheld the subaltern philosophy of equality. In addition, Reshma is also represented in a positive light: despite being from an upper-caste landlord family, she loved and supported a Dalit hero. In recent scholarly interpretations, for example, in the writings of Badri Narayan, Beth Immam and Kalapura, Chuharmal is presented as a Dalit hero.

One could say that the emergence of this version of Chuharmal's image or character was merely an appropriation by elite leaders to serve their own politics. But that was not entirely the case. For example, Ram Vilas Paswan tried hard to designate a Dalit identity to Chuharmal and projected Chuharmal as a Dalit hero, but that did not work out; Chuharmal primarily remains a *Dusādh* caste hero. This is where, I argue, the cult of Chuharmal refused to merge with an ascribed elite identity. In this regard, Scott has argued that 'contradiction has situational logic' for a marginalized community (*Domination* ix). For example, for the upper-castes, Chuharmal is a lower-caste hero, but for the dominant Backward Castes, Chuharmal becomes a Dalit hero. Among the Dalits, Chuharmal becomes a *Dusādh* hero; for the *Dusādhs* from the north Bihar region, Chuharmal is even projected as an anti-hero against another *Dusādh* hero, *Sahleś*. Thus, the image of Chuharmal depends on the subject and subjectivities of the struggles and contradictions within which it is placed.

Improvisation and Contradiction Caught on Camera

'According to you [people] who is the greatest deity of all?' I asked the narrators of a *manariyā* group who sing the heroic tales of Chuharmal and other lower-caste

deities.⁸⁴ They all looked at each other and said, ‘Do you mean *abhī ke samay mein* (at present)?’⁸⁵ Then the leader of the group said, ‘*Abhi ke samay mein to Rāma-bhagwān hakhin* (at present, Lord Rāma is the greatest among all).’ Perhaps reading my intention, he framed the question for me, ‘Then where are Chuharmal and other lower-caste deities?’ And answered, ‘See in *Rāmayuga*, *Rāma* was the deity, in *Dwāpara-* and *Tretā-yuga* *Kriṣṇa* was the important deity and....’ But before the *manariyā* leader could complete his sentence a person from audience intervened, ‘And in this *Kalayuga*, these are the deities (basically, referring to the lower-caste deities)....’ ‘Shush!’ The narrator stopped him indicating that Chuharmal as a deity of *Kalayuga* is not a positive portrayal. So, the audience member tried to explain by saying, ‘Not really...in fact, Chuharmal, Bakhtaur and other lower-caste deities are also worshipped since *Tretā-yuga*...They are not new deities. They are old deities.’ ‘So who is the greatest among all?’ I asked him to provoke.

Knowing that he was sitting amongst a crowd of varied lower-castes, he replied,

‘See every caste and individual has their own preferences. And for them, those deities are important.’ Perhaps to make all the lower-caste members happy, he presented a story in which Chuharmal fought and released seven hundred *bhagats* (shamans) from the clutches of *Bhumihārs* when *Bhumihārs* of *Morang* captured and tortured them using the torture method of *bansār* (a physical harassment technique in which a person is handcuffed from behind and laid down on the ground).

What does this improvisational performance say about a marginalized caste identity? Can we think about the possibility of similar kinds of performance in other performance genres, for example, in modern theatre? Of course, identity is performed in every performance genre. It does not ask for verification, authenticity, or referencing. Furthermore, for a marginalized community, improvisation becomes both a political and

⁸⁴ The analysis is based on a discussion with a *manariyā* group on 11 Nov. 2010.

⁸⁵ For the performer, the now becomes vital because improvisation gives primacy to ‘now’ (Jones 236).

aesthetic tool. Joni L. Jones shows this connection in context of African-American society that is also helpful in understanding the Indian context of caste-based society but there is a specificity of caste, which cannot be transported:

In a society which systematically bars African-Americans [Lower-castes] from hegemonic positions of power and constrains the development of an African-American political reality, learning to improvise in a hostile environment over which one has little control becomes a survival tool of the highest order. (Jones 235)

6. Conclusion

Some scholars read such genres and identities as a chronological development of modern genre and modern identity (from the spirit image of Chuharmal to Chuharmal as a modern Dalit hero and from the ritual performance of Chuharmal to Chuharmal in theatre and on a political platform). While one holds that contemporary drama or theatre grew out of rituals, the other believes that both developed together (Gilbert & Tompkins 56). I argue that in a cultural context like India the idea of a chronological development of genres and identities is misleading. First even contradictory genres and identities coexist in folk culture to serve different purposes in different spatialities. The performance of *Reśamā-Chuharmal* shows the diverse ways in which these generic processes take place. Also, while theatre and ballad performances seem to grow out of rituals, many times they also become part of the rituals. There are many examples where rituals have also incorporated images and performance elements from texts and images. Since all these genres exist in the same society and are performed by the same communities, they have a more complex exchange than from ritual to theatre and vice versa. Thus, genres and identities function as a part of performance strategy. Secondly, in folk performance, cult images have some continuity—an image takes elements from existing images. Thirdly, as

V. Rao suggests, even if the character is believed to be true and their character real, then ‘they undergo transformation over time’ (‘Epic and Ideologies’ 134). This applies to both the grotesque image and the *paurāṇic* moral image of Chuharmal.

Broadly, it can also be argued that image does not always ascribe to identity; and the actual identity is not always, as it is performed. We can understand this construction of different kinds of images as part of Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ in which ‘the representations of agents vary with their position (and with the interest associated with it) and with their habitus’ (‘Social Space’ 19). In this connection, Beth explores the way the performance of Dalit cultural identity is influenced by the kind of ‘public space’ (‘Dalit Mela’). My point is that, even though a folk genre has a spatial significance, it can only accommodate or excel in producing certain kinds of identities or genres unless the genres and identities have undergone a radical transformation, a major aspect I will explore in the next chapter.

This chapter discusses the radical potentialities of the day-to-day struggles which cannot be undermined in the construction of radical politics and performance. Nevertheless, when it comes to revolutionary transformations of a subject, such performances have serious limitations. An assertion based on an essentialized identity (whether caste, gender or nationality) tends not to go beyond the politics of representation. The point is well argued by Teltumbde, ‘caste is the foundation with infinite cracks and hence movements based on it are destined to fall;’ caste can never be the basis of any organized revolutionary struggle (Teltumbde ‘Some Fundamental Issues in Anti-caste Struggle’).

CHAPTER V

LABOURING BODIES IN POLITICAL PERFORMANCE: THE BALLAD OF GADDAR AND *JANA NĀṬYA MAṆḌALĪ* (JNM)

1. Introduction

It will not stop, it will not stop, it will not stop

This war of hunger will not stop

It will not stop [...]

Until the rule of looters end

The armed struggle will not stop

The blacksmith's fire is flaring up

The potter's kiln is blazing

The *Madigā*'s tambourine goes *dhanādhanadhanā*⁸⁶

Announcing the message in drumbeats

It will not stop [...] (Gaddar '*āgadu āgadu āgadu*')⁸⁷ [1]

Gaddar's ballad against oppression rings true ever more so today, as state oppression against the oppressed sections continues unabated. Despite a major assassination attempt by the state police, in which he survived with a bullet in his body, Gaddar is still singing: *āgadu āgadu āgadu*.⁸⁸ Gaddar has been associated with the *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* (People's Theatre Troupe; henceforth, JNM), a revolutionary cultural organization associated with the banned Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People's War, now the Communist Party of India (Maoist),⁸⁹ which is also known as the

⁸⁶ *Dhanādhanadhan* refers to the sound of the tambourine instrument. This tambourine instrument is commonly used by the Dalit caste *Madigā* in the Andhra Pradesh region.

⁸⁷ Parsa Venkateshwar Rao and Antara Dev Sen translate this Telugu song into English.

⁸⁸ On 6 April 1997, plain-clothes police officers from Andhra Pradesh fired five bullets at Gaddar, which caused uproar across the country. Four bullets were removed while one bullet remains in his body.

⁸⁹ CPI (Maoist) claims to fight for the rights of the poor, Dalits and Adivasi sections of society. It was renamed [CPI (Maoist)] after the merger of two Maoist political organizations, the People's War (PW) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in 2004. The Indian government has referred to the Naxalites as the

Maoist or Naxalite Party (named after the village Naxalbari in Bengal where the movement first began in 1967).⁹⁰ At present, the JNM is in a dormant state in Andhra Pradesh after a spate of severe state repression in which most of its prominent artists (almost 30 out of 35) have been killed.

Gaddar along with JNM played a significant role in reviving the Naxalite movement in the Andhra Pradesh region and several other parts of India after a violent state repression of the movement in the 1970s.⁹¹ After the demise of the people's theatre movement in India led by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), JNM was one of the few political theatre organizations in India, which had a widespread reach and influence across diverse sections of society. One of the primary aims of any revolutionary art and theatre has been 'to democratize both the production and distribution of art. (Ghosh 'Performing Change' 79). To an extent, Gaddar and JNM had been quite successful in fulfilling that aim in their praxis. For instance, the 'radical heterogeneity' of Gaddar's audiences included landless labourers, farmers, students, Adivasis and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) (D. V. Rao 201). However, JNM's contribution primarily needs to be discussed in context of what Janelle Reinelt considers theatre's role in imagining a just future ('Performing Justice' 37).

Gaddar is a popular poet, singer, performer and founder of the JNM. Even his solo performance attracts thousands of audience members across India: from Hyderabad in the south to Haryana in north India and metropolises like Bangalore, Kolkata and Delhi to the deep forests of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. With his performances, he has become a household name in Andhra Pradesh. Undoubtedly, his contribution to Indian

biggest internal security threat the nation has ever faced. Before the merger, Gaddar and JNM were associated with the People's War (PW) fraction of the Naxalites.

⁹⁰ The Naxalite Movement started when a section of Communist Party of India (Marxist) started a violent uprising in 1967 on issues of land distribution.

⁹¹ Telangana Armed Struggle (1948-51) or Telangana Rebellion was a peasant uprising against the feudal lords in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, and later against the princely state of Hyderabad ruled by the Nizams. The movement was led by the Communist Party of India and was suppressed by the state in 1951. Srikakulam movement was a militant Adivasi movement in the Srikakulam region of Andhra.

revolutionary progressive culture and performance has been immense, however, neglected. In this regard, scholars like N. Venugopal (2003) and Ramarao Peddy (2003) have rightly pointed out that the contribution of JNM cannot be imagined without Gaddar. Gaddar and JNM also played an important role in reviving and sustaining the revolutionary movement (after the 70s), when the movement was facing a difficult phase. P. Kesava Kumar notes:

Gaddar played a crucial role in sustaining Naxalite movement especially by reaching out to the masses. If Gaddar and his Jana *Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* had not gone into the masses, it would have been virtually impossible to sustain the movement at this level [*sic*].
(‘Untouchable Spring’)

According to Kumar, ‘Gaddar brought politics into everyday life situations and translated terms like ‘working class’, ‘new democracy’, ‘revolution’, ‘classless society’, ‘bourgeois state’, ‘capitalist class’, etc. into concrete life experience of people’ [*sic*] (‘Popular Culture’ 61). In this process of contextualization, he not only translated the thoughts of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ambedkar, Phule, and Periyar into songs and ballads for the oppressed sections of the society but also brought out the experiences of the oppressed communities into the middle-class public spheres and literary texts (Das *Dalit Protest* 279).⁹² Kancha Ilaiah also claims that ‘Gaddar was the first organic Telengana intellectual who established a link between the producing masses and the literary text and, of course, that text established a link between the masses and higher educational institutions’ (‘Bard’ 46). By engaging with both the lowest sections of society and the middle-class, including educational institutions, Gaddar and JNM performances collapse what Conquergood describes as the ‘unfortunate schism based on gross reduction’ of

⁹² B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), and EV Ramasami Periyar (1879-1973) are considered as three most significant intellectuals who fought against the practice of caste system. The trio became popular figures and intellectuals of the anti-caste movement in India.

experience, knowledge and understanding ('Performance Studies' 319). By enveloping performance and text, print and electronic media, oral and written into an event that can be characterized as, what Thiong'o says 'orature,' a JNM performance breaks an essentialized schism between the oral and text. Similarly, by unifying the oppressed identities based on a common language of oppression and struggles, JNM's approach shows remarkable interconnections and overlapping across fragmented identities and struggles and possibilities of a revolutionary embodiment of oppressed identities and struggles. For this matter, the JNM artist's role needs to be analysed in the context of his positionality—an act of locating oneself in relation to one's subject (Dolan 417).

In this chapter, my aim is to see how the coming of lower-caste labouring bodies in political performances led to the formation of a new corporeality and through that a new language and aesthetics of political theatre performance in India. It is to be noted that JNM is perhaps the first progressive political theatre troupe in India that broke the hierarchy of the middle-class in political theatres. Otherwise, theatre directors, writers, and leaders usually belonged to and continue to be from the middle-class and bourgeois sections. By pointing out this, I do not intend to discredit their immense contribution to political theatre and performance. I just want to draw attention to the emergence of new subjectivity, sensibility and aesthetics in political theatre performance, which has been (re)shaped by and through the labouring bodies in performance. For example, JNM artists like Gaddar, Divakar, Ramesh and Nirmala brought their labouring bodies and lived experiences in their performances.⁹³ During its peak period (in the 80s and 90s), most of the JNM artists (around 90 to 95 percent), including the leadership, were from the lower-

⁹³ Diwakar, Ramesh and Nirmala were senior JNM artist, who belonged to poor Dalit background. According to Maoist sources, Diwakar performance used to create pathos and anger through the narration of *Karamchedu* massacre (of Dalits). Police encountered him in 2001. Ramesh alias *Masterji* was a dancer-choreographer and famous *dappu*-player in JNM team. He developed *dappu* notes and composed the dance sequences of JNM's popular ballot *Ragal Jenda* (The Red Flag). Nirmala or Nimmi was a popular dancer.

caste-class background.⁹⁴ The question that arises is if the majority of JNM artists came from a labouring lower-caste background in a communist party, where caste criteria did not seem to exist, then the reasons behind the coming of these artists do not seem to only rest in the revolutionary approach of the party. The question needs special attention in the praxis and aesthetics of a revolutionary cultural organization. Though the performances of Gaddar and JNM go beyond the subjective experiences and embody the bodies beyond the 'broken bodies' (i.e. the Dalit or any oppressed identity), their performances are embedded in their experiences.

The emergence of an artist like Gaddar becomes crucial in the sense that a subaltern is voicing the concerns of subalterns (P.K. Kumar 2010; Jafri 'The Songbird'). Therefore, it is relevant to wonder at this stage whether there is any link between Gaddar and JNM performance and the performance of cultural labour. Is not JNM a revolutionary cultural organization in which subjective identity and experiences is de-individualized and de-classed in a very 'Marxist' sense? In this simplistic reading, JNM artists like Gaddar or Sandhya become an individual without a history, memory and location, leading to a singularised homogenised identity of a revolutionary artist. I, therefore, contend that the analysis of the performance of such artists needs a specific sensitive approach than a usual analysis of the role of revolutionary artists in a generalised manner.⁹⁵ Indeed, the subjectivity of the artist-performers and the proximity in performance needs to be taken into consideration to give a more inclusive and holistic picture. Here, a performance-studies approach becomes important as it acknowledges the role of individuality and creativity in the transmission of a performance (Afzal-Khan 29).

⁹⁴ 77 % of them were from Dalit castes, 20 % from the Backward Castes, 1-2 % from Adivasi and 1 % from the upper-castes (Y. Yadav 27). Later, a significant percentage of artists joined from Adivasi communities when the movement became stronger in the Adivasi region.

⁹⁵ A usual analysis might give emphasis merely on revolutionary movements and struggles and how these movements have shaped their artistic forms and not so much on their subjective experiences.

In this regard, it is to be noted that JNM artists retained and asserted their strong social identity and cultural symbols of their labouring class background. Even this social identity became important when it came to the selection of performance genres in JNM's practices. Though JNM used a wider spectrum of genres, yet, JNM mainly used the art forms and of the lower-castes such as *Golla Suddulu*, *Oggukathā* and *Dappu* dance.⁹⁶ Unlike the performances of cultural labour discussed in the earlier chapters, the performance of Gaddar and JNM is not only marked by the labouring bodies in performance but also by strong labouring themes in their representation. With labouring bodies and labouring themes in performance, the performance of cultural labour has emerged as a more obvious conceptual framework to analyse such performances.

This chapter seeks to understand what it means to be practising for the revolution in theatre (or what Boal says 'the rehearsal for revolution') and a practising revolution. It should not be only through general forms but also through language, song and culture; not only through an armed struggle to capture state power but also through songs and ballads to reach out to people; not only through utterances but also through bodily engagement. I argue that Gaddar and JNM have developed a new approach, which I would like to call (in the name of Gaddar) 'the Gaddarian approach.' JNM's Gaddarian approach has been successful in resolving several paradoxes and challenges of political theatre performances as well as of folk performances. I argue that the Gaddarian approach played an important role in the democratization of production and distribution of emancipatory culture and in the overall radicalization of language and aesthetics by understanding the political theatre as a radical cultural intervention.

⁹⁶ *Oggukathā* is a popular ballad folk from Telangana region. Traditionally, it was a caste-based performance of the shepherd castes in which *Oggus* (the narrator) tell the stories of their caste deities and ancestors. *Oggus* is also name of the instrument used in this performance. The team comprises of at least four members (extending to six members): one chief narrator who also plays all characters, imitating and gesticulating their styles, moods and modulations; one assistant and two instrumentalists, one plays a big drum and the other plays cymbal. The chief narrator or performer holds a piece of stick and kerchief as theatrical props. *Golla Suddulu* as a folk form is full of satire, used as a part of *Oggukathā* as a satire on contemporary politics and feudal social beliefs.

2. Political Theatre in India: The Legacy and Its Discontent

The progressive cultural movement or people's theatre movement in India began in the 1940s when writers and intellectuals connected with the progressive writers' movement and came together on one platform, that of the Progressive Writers Association of India (PWA). Consequently, it led to the successful culmination of the first meeting of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1943 in Mumbai. After its initial hesitation from the use of folk genres for political purposes, IPTA not only tried to ascribe equal status to the folk performance genre and linked it with the progressive culture but also strongly challenged the existing appalling opinions about these genres. According to Erin B. Mee, IPTA was 'the first major modern reaction against two deeply entrenched colonial practices: a century-long denigration of 'corrupt' indigenous forms by the colonial and Indian urban elite and the thorough commercialization of urban proscenium theatre by bourgeois Parsi entrepreneurs' (312). The works of IPTA and other cultural movements influenced JNM.⁹⁷ JNM draws its legacy from the Telangana armed struggle of the 1940s and the Srikakulam and Naxalite uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s.

The branch of IPTA in Andhra Pradesh was named as *Prajā Nāṭya Maṇḍalī* (PNM) (1946-51), which emerged as one of the most powerful branches of IPTA in the country. Unlike in Bengal, IPTA in Andhra Pradesh (PNM) had a strong rural base (Ramakrishna IPTA 188). PNM considered traditional folk performances as the most appropriate medium to reach out to the 'masses' (the lower classes, farmers and agricultural labourers). For this reason, PNM adopted several traditional folk forms such as *Burrākathā*, *Harikathā* and around 30 to 40 other folk forms (Ramakrishna 192; Peddy

⁹⁷ There has been a significant amount of research on IPTA (Pradhan 1979; Bhattacharya 1983; Krishna 2002; Bhatia 2004; Dalmia 2006; Ramakrishna 2008).

206). Among them *Burrākathā* emerged as the most popular folk form; several plays were written in this form. According to Ramakrishna, the success of PNM was as much due to 'its class composition as also due to the power of medium through which they operated namely, the traditional popular performing arts' ('Literary' 78).

During the Telangana armed struggle, PNM reached new heights with the phenomenal success of the stage play *Mābhūmi* (Our Land), written by Sunkara and Vasireddy (Ramakrishna 191). This period also saw women joining the cultural team as performers (Ramakrishna 192).⁹⁸ In 1948, when PNM was at its height amidst the growing repression of the state (which included the banning of plays), then the Communist Party of India (CPI) in a sudden move decided to close the activities of PNM at an underground meeting held at Vijayawada.⁹⁹ Subsequently in 1951, the CPI retreated from the armed struggle.¹⁰⁰ Some of the PNM artists went underground; some felt betrayed by the party's decision. Regarding this unilateral and undemocratic decision of the party, most of the artists then felt that 'there must be a visible distinction between the party and the cultural organization' (Peddy 233). Nazar, a popular *Burrākathā* artist, was in the view that a cultural troupe should not work under a party (Peddy 213). Since then the nature of the relationship between a communist party and a cultural organization has become a matter of debate among the various communist parties in India, an ongoing debate that is yet to be resolved. Though PNM's activities completely stopped by 1955, its contribution remains significant. As Ramakrishna noted:

It [PNM] indeed became a people's movement registering a breakthrough in Andhra's cultural arena. Revived forms of folk art reached people with a social purpose. Largely based on the

⁹⁸ PNM also formed a team of exclusive female *Burrākathā* performers who mainly belonged to the middle-class and happened to be wives or sisters or close kith and kin of the leaders (Ramakrishna 191-192).

⁹⁹ The Party asked the artists to withdraw from activities and look after their own survival (Peddy 213).

¹⁰⁰ The Government of Madras issued an order banning the famous play *Mābhūmi*. It must be noted that the Andhra region at that time was under the Government of Madras constituency.

countryside, drawing its workers and artistes from the middle, lower middle and poor peasantry with little or no formal education, the *Prajā nāṭya maṇḍalī* [PNM] succeeded in popularising the Communist Party programmes and politics through its performances. (Ramakrishna 'Literary' 55)

PNM set the stage for the upcoming progressive and revolutionary cultural organizations in Andhra Pradesh. Though PNM drew its artists from the middle, lower middle and poor peasantry with little or no formal education, the main command (directorship/authorship/decision-making) remained in the hands of the urban educated middle-class sections (Ramakrishna 188). In addition, the performances of PNM mainly focused its activities against the colonial and fascist forces. It tended to ignore the local problems, such as those of land, caste and gender. While PNM led to the democratization of culture through the revival of people's art forms, this process was limited in both its approach and practice. PNM was more interested in attracting the urban middle-class audiences, for most of its leadership hailed from the same sections. In fact, after the success of the play *Mābhūmi*, PNM was strongly moving from folk performances to modern proscenium theatre (Peddy 231). Even in its theatrical adaptations, it took folk forms and themes from the dominant sections. Often the plays tended to be artificial and literal adaptations. As a result, the folk performances failed to establish the organic link with the folk [communities] themselves. Like IPTA's, across the country, PNM's activities became concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas and were controlled by urban middle-class theatre practitioners and their perspectives. They somehow conceived folk as a form devoid of its constitutive communities. The folk did not thus emerge from a day-to-day engagement with folk communities and their lived experiences. According to Oberai, IPTA ignored the question of agency and defined the folk based on its own terms and understanding (qtd. in Roma Chatterjee 71-90). PNM understood folk as a

homogenous category devoid of caste, gender and other differences. P. Kesava Kumar also noted that it was largely the middle-class tastes that were reflected in new forms of song, which was a mixture of oral and written style, of the language of commoners and the elite ('Untouchable Spring'). Nevertheless, IPTA's contribution needs to be recognized as a new beginning, which marked the beginning of a left progressive political theatre-performance in India.

Whether Folk Performance for Political Purposes?

Indian theatre practitioners and scholars have remained divided on the use and efficacy of traditional folk forms or genres for political theatre. They have experimented with folk forms in various ways. Aparna Dharwadekar puts their work into four categories. Those playwrights [practitioners] who study and draw on folk material as resources in their plots, those who go beyond the 'add and stir' of folk material to weaving folk narratives and conventions in specific plays, those who rescript and present well-known older folk plays and those who represent classical and European plays in folk idioms (*Theatres of Independence* 313-14). Though the categorization is useful in an urban context, it is more about the usage of folk material in modern Indian theatre and less about the deeper engagement with folk performance as part of folk communities.

In an interview with Eugene van Erven, Safdar Hashmi, then the founder and head of *Jana Nāṭya Manc* [*Janam*, literally birth, is a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (M)], Delhi, argues that 'the traditional forms come with traditional feudal contents (superstition, backwardness, obscurantism and the promotion of feudal structures and sometimes pre-feudal formations)' (18).¹⁰¹ Therefore, he does not embrace the idea of using traditional forms for political purposes. It should be noted that Hashmi's cultural group, *Janam* has primarily used street theatre forms for their political performance.

¹⁰¹ The contract killers of the Congress Party assassinated Safdar Hashmi (1954-1989) in 1989 while performing his famous play, *Hallā Bol*.

Although in beginning, *Janam* has experimented with Nautankī folk forms and folk songs following the IPTA's traditions, it did not continue the experiment for a long time for various reasons. In comparison to JNM, Janam never had any close engagement with any folk performance or any folk communities as such. Street theatre has remained Janam's signature mark. Unlike the Janam of Delhi, Gaddar and JNM has extensively experimented with a diverse range of folk genres. Even the street theatre style of JNM is based on the already existing folk performances, for example, Gaddar and JNM have extensively used traditional Dappu-dance in their street play. This selection of form has also to do with the local cultural context and performance space. For instance, my own engagement with theatre shows that the experiments of Gaddar and JNM would not have been so successful in the multi-cultural and multi-lingual cities like Delhi, where people have come from different cultural regions. Perhaps, Janam has grasped these factors very well and therefore the group has been successful in Delhi with this street theatre forms. Nevertheless, the lack of ideological clarity on the use of traditional and folk performances has remained a major obstacle for the Janam. On the issue of the use of folk performance, Hashmi in fact acknowledged that 'things have not been resolved on theoretical and practical level' (18).

In this regard, G.P. Deshpande goes a step further in arguing that the traditional forms are so seductive that 'people just get carried away with the traditional elements,' and therefore, the form is not appropriate for modern rational dialogue. As he puts it:

The traditional folk forms have a lot of energy and this energy is seductive. Modernity, on the other hand, is in many ways an austere business. How do you deal with Nora's dilemma in terms of traditional forms? Modernity leads to isolation, whereas all our traditional forms are aimed to create a kind of *ānanda* [aesthetic enjoyment]. Modernity, on the other hand, denies *ānanda*. It

seems to believe in isolation, loneliness, angst, trauma and so on.

Traditional forms are simply not equipped to deal with this.

(Deshpande qtd. in Ghosh 99)

According to Deshpande, one can only use traditional forms in modern contexts after subverting traditional forms by merely retaining the fun and energy of its forms (basically, to supplant energy in modern theatre). Bharucha also echoes a similar concern by saying that ‘relying on the principles of empathy and emotional amplification, the very structures of *Jātrā* seem to resist dialectical thinking’ (*Rehearsals* 120). I see two major problems here. First, these scholars and practitioners take traditional forms of theatre as a homogenous category. Second, they tend to essentialize traditional forms as anti-modern, anti-contemporary, somewhat ‘irrational’ and pre-modern and very far from modern consciousness. G.P. Deshpande’s view on traditional forms is so generalized and reductionist that it obscures some of the basic characteristics of folk performances.

It is to be pointed out that not all kinds of traditional forms are aimed to create *ānanda* (aesthetic enjoyment). Even in the literal sense, several traditional folk forms contain complex philosophical dilemmas. We can take an example of Kabir’s *Bījak* and Lalan’s Baul and for example, the performance traditions of Akka Mahadevi and Meera, which carry the deeper psychological and philosophical meanings. Scholars have also noted that in a majority of cases, Indian traditional and folk performances reflect patterns of Brechtian epic theatre (See Dalmia 2006; Tanvir 1974). It would be implausible to argue that folk performances as epical theatre cannot present the modern complexities. In this regard, commenting on Brecht’s ‘epic theatre,’ Walter Benjamin rightly opined that one might regard epic theatre as more dramatic than the dialogue-based, but epic theatre need not, for that reason, be any less philosophical (*Understanding Brecht* 6). Benjamin’s opinion breaks the misconception that folk performance either resists dialectical thinking or in any sense lacks modern consciousness. Utpal Dutt, another Marxist practitioner, has

also criticized the view that folk elements can only be used to supplant energy to modern theatre and performance:

The so-called folk songs are used merely to lampoon some aspects of exploitation; shorn of their content, they sound ridiculous. It is a petty bourgeois, urban and ignorant approach to the folk song, which automatically assumes that in the original forms it cannot capture the political struggle of our time. The fact, however, is that the folk tradition has already captured the struggle of its own time as well as ours in a complex manner; its apparent naivete is an artistic device concealing an intense moment of suffering in the life of the masses. By knocking out precisely that content and using only the score is to replace a vision with a slogan, to misuse folklore, to descend to formalism.

(166)

However, the use of folk elements (like *Jātrā*) for political purposes by Dutt was itself criticized for the same petty bourgeois understanding of folk performances. For example, Bharucha criticized him for manipulating the emotions of the people through hallucination and melodrama, for envisioning the *Jātrā* character of Mao as ‘the good king who lives in cave’ and Chiang Kai-shek as ‘the evil king who suffers from epileptic fits’ (Bharucha *Rehearsals* 120-21). On the other hand, with the same bourgeois and petty bourgeois understanding, [lifeless] poster plays are being produced, ‘which denies the complexity of reality and just hits the head’ (G.P.Deshpande 96).¹⁰² Another significant director, Badal Sircar, made an important significant contribution at the level of the actor’s body, form and theatrical space, but he did not experiment much with folk performance genres as such. . His theatre was primarily an urban theatre that explores the

¹⁰² For this understanding of people’s theatre, G.P. Deshpande rightly puts that the aristocracy had painting; petty bourgeois has posters (96).

lives of the middle-class (Shiva Prakash *Muffled Voices* 63).¹⁰³ Besides these experiments, several theatre groups under the influence of Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' have been experimenting with folk performances, for example *Janasanskriti* in West Bengal. The Oppressed theatre was supposed to be a theatrical space in which 'spectators themselves discover solutions to their collective problems' (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 2). Funded by neo-liberal agencies, in most of the cases, these theatres have become an effective communication mechanism for delivering pre-scripted visions of development and liberation where theatre fits neatly into a 'service-delivery' model of development (Ahmad 2002; Kerr 2003; Plastow 1998). Despite having revolutionary forms, much of the theatre without proper revolutionary content ends up becoming what Kidd and Kumar (1981) call a theatre based on pseudo-Freirean education processes—revolutionary in form, reactionary in ideology and pedagogy. A major problem of such theatres rests in the absence of radical language and distance with community's experiences. Such political theatres not only use posters, but also largely depend on the parodies of folk songs and Bollywood movie songs. While parodies of folk elements de-contextualize their meanings, the parody of commercialized and objectified movie songs comes with their own market language, reinforces fetishized forms of language and symbols even in its counter-cultural conceptualisation. We can see that the above-mentioned analysis of folk performances is full of problematic understanding of political theatre and performance.

The successful experiments of Gaddar and JNM along with the works of several other practitioners (e.g., Habib Tanvir) showed that the problems of using folk performances for socio-political purposes is more about the politics and cultural understanding and less about the malady of folk performances. In this context, Naithani

¹⁰³ In fact, Sircar was not so interested in using indigenous folk performances and instead he was trying to develop new language of theatre in forms of what he called, 'Third Theatre,' 'a theatre that would employ an idiom unique to the postcolonial urban environment' (Mitra 'Badal Sircar').

has made an interesting comparison between three contemporary folk artists in India: Bhupen Hazarika, Gaddar, and Illa Arun. While Hazarika belongs to IPTA's progressive tradition, Gaddar belongs to the revolutionary tradition and Arun belongs to the neo-liberal market tradition. According to Naithani, while Hazarika's approach imbibed a learned and romantic approach synchronized with his politics of a non-violent revolt and change in society, Gaddar adapted a militant approach in the contemporarization of folk performances, while Illa Arun has adapted the market approach (78). She argues that one's approach to folklore is also one's approach to folk [communities] itself (78). She further points out, 'Whether one practices folk as idealized noble sufferers of society or as potential harbingers of change or as 'backward' 'rural' populace is a matter of political ideology' (78). In reference to JNM and earlier political theatre groups, Peddy argues that the ideological clarity of JNM [on culture] itself is a revolutionary cultural movement in Andhra Pradesh (232). In this way, despite some limitations, JNM was able to resolve some of these major problems and contradictions of middle-class people's theatres through its radical revolutionary approach. Needless to say that, this radical approach of JNM would not have been possible without the participation of labouring bodies in performance and the positionality of the performers.

3. Performance of the Spring Thunder and Birth of JNM

In 1967, a small movement that started in the small village called Naxalbari (a village in West Bengal) engulfed the entire country—from Bihar to Punjab and Bengal to Andhra Pradesh. This event was termed as the 'Spring Thunder over India' by none other than the Mao-led Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since then Spring Thunder has become an analogy for the Naxalite movement in India. The movement started when a significant fraction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) decided to follow the path of the Chinese Revolution and aspired to liberate India from what they thought was 'the

clutches of feudalism and imperialism’. They are widely termed as the Naxalites and their movement is called the Naxalite or the Maoist movement.

According to Mao, in a revolutionary armed struggle, an army with guns is not enough; it also needs a cultural army (‘Talk at the Yen-an Forum’). These two types of armies became an immediate formula and were to be adopted by a new communist organization—the All India Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR), later named as the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a breakaway faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).¹⁰⁴ Several artists came forward; among them Subbarao Panigrahi, Chinnarao and V. Satyam emerged as the most prominent cultural figures in Andhra.

Subbarao’s life and works later became a model for the JNM. He adopted a popular folk form *Jāmulkulakathā* from the Srikakulam region. The selection of *Jāmulkulakathā* also seems to be a very conscious political choice. As a folk form, it had many advantages over *Burrākathā* (extensively used by PNM). *Jāmulakulakathā* is simpler than *Burrākathā* and can be performed with fewer artists. Unlike *Burrākathā*, it does not need any platform; it can be performed anywhere and at any time (Kumar ‘Untouchable Spring’). It was more localized in terms of style. The model especially suits the guerrilla theatre performers who always perform risking life and space. Subbarao was as a guerrilla performer and was killed in an encounter with the police. His songs ‘Some people are afraid of Red’ and ‘Where are you going, O brothers? / Wait for us! We shall march together’ became popular throughout the region.

Despite similarities, the content of the songs and performances of Subbarao was qualitatively different from PNM. In particular, the songs and performance were revolutionized with the Srikakulam armed struggle (Venugopal 2003; Kumar 2004). Unlike PNM artists, the artists of the Spring Thunder were more closely associated with

¹⁰⁴ The faction broke away from Communist of India (Marxist), which was already a breakaway faction of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

the people and their culture. Most of them were also part of the armed guerrilla squads; therefore, they also needed different kinds of performance genres unlike PNM's. Subbarao's performance left a strong and lasting impact on the Srikakulam region.

The first generation of JNM artists and the Revolutionary Writers Association (acronym *Virasam*) were largely influenced by his performance and political commitment. *Virasam* was born on 4 July 1970 to propagate revolutionary ideas. However, it was not able to reach out to common people and was mainly confined to intellectuals, writers and textual traditions. In the meantime, the legacy of Subba Rao continued with another revolutionary poet-singer Cherabandaraju, popularly known as Chera. Cherabandaraju, who came from a peasant family background was one of the few revolutionary writers 'who recognized song as the right form if poetry was to convey political ideas to the large mass of illiterate and semi-literate toiling people' (Balagopal 1188). To engage directly with the common people, he shifted from the form of prose or poetry to that of the song. He became a one-man cultural troupe in the Andhra-region. Kanchan Kumar notes that though he was not a great singer, his songs and poems were marked by a revolutionary fervour (*Punarjanam*): 'To capture/The refrain of my revolutionary song/ in my footprints, they send the dust to analyst' (Cherabandaraju 'Rebirth' in Banerjee *Naxalite Poetry* 104).¹⁰⁵ In a poem entitled '*Vande-mātaram*,' he addresses *Bhārata Mātā*, who is perceived as a female prostitute: 'Yours is the beauty that has mortgaged each limb in the international market/ Yours is the youth that is lying blissfully in the arms of the wealthy.' The traditions of Panigrahi and Cherabandaraju created a group of revolutionary artists who later formed JNM in 1972.

In 1966, a group called Arts Lovers Association (ALA) in the suburban city of Hyderabad could not remain aloof from the then existing political situation in the country (Narasim Rao Personal Interview 2 Jan. 2011). Influenced by the Srikakulam and

¹⁰⁵ Cherabandaraju was a founding member of *Virasam*. He spent most of the Emergency period in Jail.

Naxalite movements, under the leadership of B. Narasing Rao, an experimental artist, the ALA met *Virasam*. In 1970-71, Gaddar and a few other artists joined the ALA and later they changed its name to *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī*. B. Narasing Rao and Gaddar formally founded the troupe in 1972 in Hyderabad, with a team of around twenty members in a close association with then the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).¹⁰⁶ In the beginning, the JNM activities were limited to the city of Hyderabad. Gradually, its activities spread to rural and Adivasi areas, particularly after the party decided to start the *Grāmālāku Tārālandī* (Go to Villages) campaign in 1979. In this period, several workshops were organized and hundreds of new members were trained. The campaign was undertaken by the Radical Students Union (RSU), Radical Youth League (RYL) and the JNM to spread the message of agrarian revolution. In this campaign, small groups comprising youths, students and cultural activists went from village to village performing revolutionary songs and interacting with people (Venugopal 2003). The campaign resulted in the formation of *Rytu Cūlie Sanghams* (the Peasants Landless and Poor Organizations, RCS). As JNM toured all over Andhra, its popularity soared and several artists and amateurs joined the team. By the early 1980s, every district of Andhra Pradesh had a branch of the JNM cultural troupe.

4. 'Political' of the JNM's Political Theatre

In the context of political theatres in Bengal, Bharucha argues that political theatre by *raison d'être* has its allegiance to people who have been denied their fundamental human rights (*Rehearsals* xvii). What makes a play political, he argues is not its fidelity to the [political] party or to any model prescribed by, say, Brecht or Piscator, but 'its fidelity to a people whose oppression cried out to be enacted on stage' (*Rehearsals* xvii).

¹⁰⁶ Early members of JNM were Narasing Rao, Gaddar, Vangapandu Prasad, Sandhya, Nimmi, Sanjeev, Dashrath, Satyanarayana, Krishna, Narahari, Narsimha, Dayanand, Maccha Bollaram, Pran Rao, Gal, Patti and others.

The question now arises as to how we look at right wing ‘political’ theatre in India or the theatres of the Nazis for instance. In addition, on what basis do we differentiate them from an NGO’s social drama, which also resonates with the cry of the common people? I find that the *raison d’être* of political theatre is limited. Political theatre rather needs to be defined in terms of politics—the affairs of the state in which a political theatre takes sides. In this context, I find Michael Kirby’s definition of political theatre quite appropriate. Michael Kirby defines political theatre in terms of political subject matter: it is ‘intentionally concerned with the state, takes sides in politics and interprets theatre politically’ (130). He adds that in political theatre, ‘political concern and engagement must be in the work, not in the mind of observer’ (130). Here, I say that JNM’s performances are political not because I interpret theatre politically, or in the sense that every theatre is political in one sense or the other, but rather as an affirmation and avowal of ‘political’ inherent and embodied in the praxis of JNM. JNM makes a choice in politics; it takes sides in politics, it is affiliated with a political party and it has explicit political aims. In addition, JNM refers to governmental problems and issues.¹⁰⁷ JNM’s theatre and performance is largely intended to be political.

Kirby considers political theatre as an intellectual theatre because ‘it deals with ideas and concepts (usually in an attempt to attack or support a particular position) and political meaning is read by the spectators’ (130). He argues that the idea that ‘all theatre is political ignores a study of theatre in favour of a study of politics’ (132). For him this outlook rather becomes a ‘political view of theatre,’ which is intellectual. Kirby rightly argues that it is important to study and analyse political theatre, not because of and in terms of its politics, but because it illustrates and illuminates particular theatrical dimensions (132). This formulation, although useful, becomes problematic if one is to say that (any kind or all) theatre is not political. It would rather be more useful to say that all

¹⁰⁷ Kirby is against pitting every theatre as political theatre (130). He further says projecting all theatre as political ignores a study of theatre in favour of a study of politics (132).

theatre is political but all theatre is not political theatre. This is so because politics does not reside only in particular theatrical dimensions or only in spectatorship, as Kirby argues, but also in the very escapist statement that theatre is not political or ‘theatre should not be mixed with politics.’ On the other hand, even a political theatre that is ‘boring’ and engaged in sloganeering inherits some aspects of theatricality with a mere claim that it is a theatre—the spectators see it as a theatre.

Following the Marxist-Leninist ideology of its party, JNM aimed to cultivate a new democratic culture for the New Democratic Revolution (NDR)—that is, ‘thorough democratisation of the structure as its primary task’ (‘Maoist Party Programme’ 2004). JNM never had its constitution of its own and it was considered as a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) PWG. In fact, this problem later emerged as a major discontent between the party and the JNM artists; some of the JNM artists saw it as one of the major reasons of JNM’s failure on the later period besides the state’s repression. I will be discussing this failure in the later section of this chapter.

The Maoist party described India as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society.¹⁰⁸ One primary task of JNM was to expose the semi-colonial and semi-feudal ideology of the ruling class. They have done this through, for example, major plays like *Kārāmcēdu Dalitā Pululu* (about feudal landlord and Dalits), *Celī Candrammā* (about women labourers’ struggle against the feudal system and the inherent patriarchy) and *Ryutukūlī vijāyam* (about the workers in un-organized sectors).

Performance Event

The JNM performance generally begins with saluting and paying homage to the revolutionaries and martyrs of the revolutionary movement. For this purpose, JNM has

¹⁰⁸ India is ‘semi-colonial’ because the Indian ruling classes (big business, top bureaucrats, and leading politicians running the centre and states) are tied to imperialist interests. It is semi-feudal because ‘the old feudal relations have not been smashed completely, only a certain amount of capitalist growth has been superimposed on them’ (Azad 4379).

replaced the ancestor's name with the martyrs' name, which is in fact part of a performance tradition I have discussed in the chapter on the *Bhūmi-pūjā* performance.

The martyr's song goes like this,

Oh students, youth, martyrs of nation

Lal salaam (red salute) for you

You were the one who fought

For land, food and for nation's freedom

From the clutches of the exploiters (JNM's '*Lāl Salām*') [2]

The performance of this song despite becoming secular political does not lose its ritual efficacies. This resists an easy separation between what Schechner designates as political processes and ritual processes (*Performance Theory* 10). Often at the end of this particular song, audiences develop a great compassion for JNM's ideals both because of JNM's own political commitment and because of their ritual-effectiveness.

I first saw Gaddar's eclectic ballad performance as a student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2001. He had come to pay a tribute to Naveen Babu, a student leader of the university who had joined the Naxalite movement and then been killed in an encounter with the police in 2000. Recovering the dead body and paying tribute to the dead in a dignified manner became a major performance event for Gaddar and the JNM artists. In an open space, with chorus of some students in the background, Gaddar sang a eulogy and paid tribute to the student leader,

Salutations, Salutations to you O our children

We salute you, we hail you O little ones

O brave ones, brave children of Naxalbari

The valorous sons of Naxalbari, children of farmers and agricultural labourers

Each of you fell and merged with the stars

And sprouted like sun

We who had nowhere to turn—our children
 Have you become stars to show us the way, our little ones?
 As the crows caw-cawed, we opened our doors to speak to them
 Tell us who is coming, we stand waiting
 Will you come as crows, our children?
 Will you answer the call of our heart and fly away, little ones?
 When the village parrot comes, we let it build its nest
 We will keep watch so the pair doesn't break
 Will you come as the egg of that parrot, our children?
 From that egg will you become our children, our little ones? (Gaddar '*Vandanālu vandanālammo* ') [3]

With this emotive song, Gaddar immediately touched the hearts of the audiences. He used a red-handkerchief as a theatrical prop. He kept improvising with it: using it as a red flag, a martyr who had laid his/her life and a child playing in the lap of the mother. Apparently, he admitted that while writing this song, he had the theme in mind but he was struggling to find the [people's] tune for it. One day he imagined how mothers in villages recalled, reminisced and wailed for their dead children, and 'the tune fell into place' (Gaddar qtd. in D.V. Rao 2000). I remember, like many others, how deeply moved we were by the performance. For many days, we kept humming the simple tune—*aa ha, o ho*.¹⁰⁹ The tune always reminded me of a dream of revolution and always touched my inner core. For that performance, Gaddar and JNM used pidgin language (Hindi-English-Telugu) with regional folk tunes to address the multilingual crowds.

I will take another example from the JNM's play of *Naxalbārī Biddālu* (the Children of Naxalbari), which is supposed to influence thousands of people to join the

¹⁰⁹ In general, during the JNM's performance, the spectators become the chorus. JNM has also developed some technique to engage them more. So, generally, performers will sing *aa ha*, so the spectators will sing *oo...ho* and vice-versa. The spectators commonly support in refrain.

movement or lend support. *Naxalbāri Biddālu* is a plot about four students who participated in the Naxalite movement, and were shot dead by police in ‘encounters.’¹¹⁰ The story is based on a real incident, which took place in the Medak district of Andhra during the period of Emergency.¹¹¹ Gaddar moulded the incident into *Oggukathā*.

According to the performers of this play, the performance of *Naxalbāri Biddālu* starts with the entrance of the main narrator whose name is Birappa and who is searching for his colleague Mallanna (who is also the assistant narrator). Birappa looks around but does not see Mallanna. Therefore, he calls out his colleague’s name. Next, Mallanna enters from the other side. He asks Birappa as to why he has come there and what the meeting is about. ‘Our people organized this meeting and asked me to sing a song, so I am here,’ says Birappa. ‘Let’s call another colleague Komaranna.’ Both summon Komaranna. Interestingly, these three names are also the names of the ancestor deities of the shepherd communities in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. They decide to begin the performance with a song. Then Komaranna enters from amongst the audience; he plays the *Hāsya* (Joker) character in *Oggukathā*. *Hāsya* comes with a jute bag on his shoulder, which has a big hole in it, indicating the condition of the poor. He moves on the stage and shows the hole to the audience. It is to be noted that the names of all these characters are based on the ancestor caste-deities, which further creates ritual-efficacy.

The main narrator then explains how the four Naxalite students come to the village, interact with people and try to understand the socio-economic structure and power relationships there. The Naxalite students along with villagers analyse the problems of the village and conclude that they have to revolt against the upper-caste

¹¹⁰ In most of the cases, there is no specific plot in JNM plays; JNM uses spontaneous compilation of various issues with a broad plot structure (Peddy 288). Usually in these performances, minimal, available suggestive costumes and properties are used.

¹¹¹ The state of Emergency (25 June 1975 to 21 March 1977) was imposed in India by the Congress Government led by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi which absolutely suspended all major rights and freedom enacted in the Indian constitution. Opposition’s members were jailed; and electoral democracy was withheld during the period. The era is considered as the black era of Indian democracy.

feudal landlord. When they revolt against the landlord, he calls the police force. The police officers come and the Superintendent of the Police asks the Naxalite students.

SP: Which village you belong to?

Which political party you belong to?

Which squad you belong to?

If you do not answer clearly

We will shoot you!

NAXALITES: We are the sons of Naxalbari

We are the symbols of justice

We oppose the exploitations

We are the brothers of comrade Satyam

Who sacrificed his life in Srikakulam Armed Struggle

We hold the red flags in our hand and lead the struggle. (Yadav 55) [4]

An argument breaks out between the police and students. The police have no answers to the questions of the students. They labelled all these problems as problems of law and order. All the four students are shot. The story of selfless sacrifice of the four students who are the children of peasants and agricultural labourers always moves the audience. No less than the subject matter, theatricality gives a meaning to this play. The play is written in a very simple language and people sing the songs even after the performance. In particular, the songs and dialogues of *Naxalbāri Biddalu* were once very popular and appealing among the people of that region. Thus, even after the performance, the play retained its vitality through the songs, tunes and legends of these martyrs. In fact, through the performances the martyrs became the new legends and many times replaced the older. For a similar epical performance, V.N. Rao argues that ‘an epic perceived as a real event and commemorated in a ritual acquires deep meaning’ (‘Epics and

Ideology'134). The positionality and class location of the revolutionaries probably also make this play more engaging and poignant for the audiences.

Performance Tools and Methods

The JNM troupe has been adapting local dialects, folk tunes and songs reflecting local political problems and cultures along with costumes and make-ups. Localization or indigenization of aesthetics in its most extreme forms had been one of the major reasons behind the success of JNM. Maerhofer argues that this localized capability of the aesthetic dimension becomes the source for political confrontation and initiates the necessary mechanism for decolonization (206). However, unlike the Césaire ideology of Negritude or the idea of local culture, which sometimes also proliferates in uncritical localization, JNM's localized Marxist perspective challenged the local power structures and took into account the subject's problems. The cultural praxis of Gaddar and JNM while drawing from Marxism and adapting *desī* (used for 'native' and 'countryside') goes beyond both the derivative aspects of Marxism and *desī* and 'foregrounds itself in the local configuration of power, which is constitutive of the hegemonic orders of capitalism and Brahminism' (Guru *The Idea of India* 42). JNM has developed over time its own distinct costumes based on local traditions; a simplified version of a shepherd's dressing from the shepherd's community of the Telangana region (the dress is also used by the traditional *Oggukatha* performers).¹¹² JNM performances also use make-up, depending on the region of their performers; for example, coastal area teams mostly wear make-up, as there has been a tradition of mask. All performers also wear anklets. Similarly, the Dalit's *dappu* became the official instrument of JNM. JNM also developed a note—*Dhim-ku-ta-ka*—for *dappu* (Kumar 'Untouchable Spring'; Yadav 65). In performance, *Dappu* dance energizes the performers and even invites the local audience to participate and dance.

¹¹² In the beginning, they used to perform in *lungis*. But the costume was not appropriate, neither for female performers nor from the view point of the audiences.

When it comes to the training of artists, JNM believed that artists are not born, but made. This was an existing prominent trend among the local performance traditions. Therefore, there were no special criteria for selecting artists. Those who show interest could freely join the training camp free of cost. JNM's training classes involved workshop-oriented training which ranges from one week to a month. Not going into the details of a particular folk genre technique, unlike training in the classical performances, here training was given on selected song and performance pieces in production-oriented workshops. For instance in 1983, around 160 artists were selected and trained in seven major forms depending on their interests and skills. Artists were divided into teams or troupes according to forms and genres. Many times, traditional artists were also invited for the training and for adaptation purposes. The training classes were conducted in different regions to make them more accessible to participants. Since song was an important performative element in JNM, during the workshop everybody was taught and encouraged to write and compose their songs. Though some of the JNM artists like Gaddar and Vangapandu Prasad Rao excelled in ballad and song writing, most of the JNM artists could write, compose and sing their songs.

JNM also organized local song and performance competitions and give a platform to those people who do not sing and perform in public places, most importantly to women performers. Many artists of the JNM joined the group through this assemblage. It had also helped in changing the perception of folk performers and women who were not supposed to perform in the public sphere. Such participation of women in the public sphere was quite different from the middle-class women's participation in public sphere. While the former represented the labouring bodies, the latter's performances resonated the languages of the middle-class 'ideal' women.

5. Gaddar: A Labouring Body in Political Performance

On 20 February 1990, Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, was taken over by a sea of rustic humanity. Waving red flags, sporting red shawls or red turbans, they compelled attention by their sheer numbers, as they converged from all directions on the expanse of the Nizam College grounds. The estimated crowd of over two lakhs [*two hundred thousand*] exceeded many times over previous gatherings at the same venue when electioneering was on merely a few months earlier. And then came the flashpoint.

A hush fell over the multitude as a short, dark man ascended the stage. He looked very much like any of them. Muscular, attired in the traditional garb of the agricultural worker. Bare-chested, with a red scarf round his neck and an olive green woollen blanket with a red border thrown over his shoulders. He is simply called Gaddar. The man who cherishes hopes of bringing about a revolution—changing the lives of the common folk—with his song. (*The Illustrated Weekly*)¹¹³

The above scene describes people's response to Gaddar when he surfaced in the city of Hyderabad after seven years of underground life. Gaddar is *noms de guerre* and a popular name of Gummadi Vittal Rao, India's foremost revolutionary artist who is also addressed as *prajā kavi* (people's poet) and *prajā gāyaka* (people's singer). People have different names and titles for him. Some consider him as the Bob Dylan of India and for some he is the songbird who sings of the revolution.¹¹⁴ In 2011, India's leading magazine

¹¹³ He went underground after the Karamchedu Dalit Massacre in 1985, when police started harassing them.

¹¹⁴ About Gaddar, Ajith Pillai in the *Outlook* magazine writes that if the Naxalite movement in Central India ever had a Bob Dylan, then this must be him. Jafri symbolizes him as a songbird who sings of revolution.

Tehelka listed him as one of the ten crazy crusaders of India who sings in an earthy, strong voice with words that shake people.¹¹⁵ In Telugu literature, the present age of literature is termed as the age of poet Gaddar. Kancha Illaih, a foremost Dalit-Bahujan intellectual counts him as the first organic intellectual from the Telangana region. But for his own people and other commoners, he is still Gaddaranna.¹¹⁶ At times, the JNM team is known as the party (team) of Gaddaranna. Though he remains unrecognized internationally and particularly in the elitist traditions of Indian theatre, performance and culture studies debates, Gaddar is undoubtedly an unparalleled voice and a political performer in south Asia. He is someone who has been relentlessly performing for justice.

Gaddar was born in a poor Dalit family in 1949. Now in his sixties, Gaddar has experienced the full circle of life: untouchability, child labour, discrimination, and life in jail, constant threat of arrests, being underground, and the taste of bullets (Ilaiiah 'Bard' 49). With a risk of generalization and recognizing that not all bodies are one, Gaddar's autobiography can be written as the biography of the JNM artists of that time, who belonged to the similar socio-economic background.¹¹⁷ Some had never been to school, others are dropouts from schools and colleges. Most of them were part of the labouring activities and have had very similar lived experiences. Sometimes their experiences vary, like for instance if Gaddar faced class and caste-based discrimination, then women artists like Padma, Sandhya and Kumari faced gender discrimination along with other kinds of discrimination.¹¹⁸ However, their labouring bodies and cultural background of folk culture united them. They joined the movement not only because their artistic values and

¹¹⁵ http://www.tehelka.com/story_main49.asp?filename=Ws090411CrazyCrusaders.asp

¹¹⁶ The use of *annā* after someone's name is an informal way of addressing them, carrying with a sense of love, affection and oneness, without a sense of any hierarchy. Thus, Gaddaranna brings down any hierarchy which may exist between Gaddar and common people. It symbolises that Gaddar belongs to them.

¹¹⁷ Dalit women scholars have argued against the tendency to see all women as Dalits and against the mainstream Indian feminist position, which feels that women of all communities and Dalits are equally badly discriminated. Dalit women rather see themselves as 'Dalits who are also women'—who face the brunt of caste, class and gender oppression (Ghosh 'Dalit Feminism' 268-279).

¹¹⁸ Padma, Sandhya and Kumari as women artists in JNM broke the male bastion in the art of narrating stories and *dappu* playing. At the same time, they also broke the stereotype commonly associated with women performing on stage, which was considered degraded and low. Padma and Kumare were later killed.

labour were recognized by a revolutionary party but also because as a community from an oppressed social background, they shared a common vision of a world without exploitation. This may be called a Marxist utopian vision, but, as Gail Omvedt would argue, such ‘utopias lay claim to some kind of reality, the reality of being possible, and in doing so provide the motivation for efforts at social transformation’ (*Seeking Begumpura* 15). The commonality of their own life experiences, political commitment and the bodily corporealities united them. For example, when Gaddar sings his autobiographical song of the struggles of his mother, it unites all of them:

O Mother Lachumamma, your blouse is torn
 Your hair is soiled; your sari is in rags
 You have no money to buy new ones
 Even in that condition what have you done?
 You planted saplings, walking backwards like bull
 In order to produce food from the mud
 (Gaddar ‘Lachumamma’ qtd. in Ilaiah 45)[5]

Lachumamma as a landless Dalit mother, struggling for life, became a symbolic mother. The song also reflects the life and struggles of other JNM artists who came from similar backgrounds. For example, Sandhya, a leading woman artist of JNM, affirmed that in the struggles of Lachumama, she could also visualize the struggles of her own mother (Personal Interview 3 Jan. 2011). The autobiography of JNM’s individual artists becomes a de-individualized biography of the team, not in a falsity of the de-classed way, but in a more subjective and individualized way. This de-individualized biography carries the strong sense of the self and articulates their lived experiences of day-to-day lives.

In her study of Dalit autobiographies, Beth notes that Dalit autobiographies, like the autobiographies of other socially marginalized groups, serve a very different purpose (‘Hindi Dalit Autobiography’). Here the personal identity belongs to the communal

identity, ‘their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression’(4). Their subjectivity is determined by the deep connection between the ‘individual self’ and the ‘communal self’ (2). Orsini has made a similar argument about the autobiography of women writers in Hindi language, which also goes through a tension between ‘I’ and ‘we’ (*The Reticent Autobiographer*). Stephen Butterfield has shown this connection in African-American autobiography in which ‘the self belongs to the people and the people find their voice in the self’ (qtd. in Beth ‘Hindi Dalit Autobiography’ 2). In such autobiographies, ‘the past and present of the community itself becomes the plot of the story’ (Manager Pandey qtd. in Beth). Therefore, Dalit, Adivasi, and labouring-class women artists in JNM should not be considered as individual artists; rather, they represent artists belonging to a community and sharing a similar lived experience. They embody their socio-historical experiences not only in terms of corporealities but also in their physicality, for example, in bodily movement and social gesticulation. However, these artists from the labouring communities do not need to be valorised for their oppressed class background, nevertheless their embodied lived experiences should not be taken for granted and must be considered in aesthetic and political analysis. Otherwise, there is an inherent danger that we may end up comparing an artist like Gaddar’s song and performance to what Adorno has called ‘the individualisation of the collective spirit’ (qtd. in S. Chatterjee ‘The Case of the Irritating Song’ 92). I argue that in case of Gaddar and other JNM artists, the individual performer carries the collective spirit of the community and their labouring bodies carry the unmarked performativity of the evidence of the lived experiences.

After finishing school, Gaddar could not continue with his college education because of his poor economic background and started working as labourer in a factory. In 1969, he joined the movement for a separate state of Telangana. To support the

movement, he along with others, formed a *Burrākathā* theatrical troupe, *Bāpujī Burrākathā* Party, named after Gandhi. Soon he felt disillusioned and left the group. For a short period, he also gave performances on family planning with the Ministry of Broadcasting but soon returned to his ‘career’ as a manual labourer in a chemical factory. On the invitation of Narasing Rao, then an experimental artist, he joined the Art Lovers Association (ALA). It was in an interaction with B.Narasing Rao that Gaddar saw hope in revolutionary politics. Under the guidance of Narasing Rao, Gaddar wrote his first song, *Apuro Rickshaw* (Stop O Rickshaw-puller):

Stop O Rickshaw-puller I am coming
 You work from morning to night
 but your stomach is not filled
 So much blood and sweat
 Yet you earn hardly anything
 Stop O Rickshaw-puller, I am coming [...]
 The price of petrol and diesel is going up
 But the price of your blood and sweat just keeps slipping. (1971) [6]

While Gaddar’s ‘I’ became the revolution, the song gave him instant recognition, particularly among the urban labouring sections (rickshaw-pullers and workers). Moreover, the success of the song set the socio-political and aesthetic approach of Gaddar. While the Art Lovers Association (ALA) was renamed as *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī*, Gummadi Vittal chose to become Gaddar (meaning, a rebellion).¹¹⁹

Gaddar as a Phenomenon

P. Keshav Kumar’s Gaddar phenomenon interestingly explores the emergence of Gaddar as a phenomenon in popular culture in Andhra Pradesh. Kumar rightly noted:

¹¹⁹ The Gadar Party formed in exile in the United States, aimed at overthrowing British imperialism in the early decades of the last century (D.V. Rao 198).

He is a unique cultural phenomenon of this millennium that representing the revolutionary cultural struggles of contemporary world. He is a culminating point of people's culture and revolutionary politics [sic]. (Kumar 'Untouchable')

But Gaddar's transformation from an individual to a phenomenon went through a long political and cultural process. After *Apuro Rickshaw*, Gaddar wrote several other songs and ballads and performed them throughout Andhra Pradesh. All branches of JNM also performed his songs and ballads. Gaddar, along with other artists, went underground on occasion. But they kept writing and performing their songs. After the emergency, Gaddar wrote the ballad, *Naxalbārī Biddalu* (The Children of Naxalbari). With this ballad, Gaddar became popular among the Naxalites as well as among the local people. In 1979, the Communist Party of India (ML-People's War) asked JNM to organize a training class for the youth, especially college students. Around 150 artists were trained in different folk forms. The Party asked these trained artists to 'Go to Village'; they went to several villages in Telengana and the Andhra Pradesh region, taking with them the popular songs of Gaddar. Soon Gaddar became a household name in rural Andhra. Describing this phase of the 1980s, Pandita writes:

Maoist ideologues like the legendary balladeer Gaddar, would travel from one village to another, talking about hunger, deprivation, marginalisation, caste bias and sing songs on martyrs like Peddi Shankar. The Maoist campaign was so successful that it would prompt a chief minister to declare: *Aata, maata, paata bandh* (ban on cultural performances, speeches, and songs). (Pandita 82)

JNM activity was again banned in 1982 by the government of N.T. Rama Rao. On 17 July 1985, in an infamous incident in Karamchedu village in the Prakasam district of

Andhra Pradesh, six Dalits were killed and more than a 100 left injured by the upper-castes. The incident, known as the Karamchedu Massacre outraged the Dalits. Their leaders gave an exclusive call to all Dalits of the state to ‘*Chalo Chirala*’ (March to Chirala town). The response generated a mammoth crowd of 300,000 Dalits, who voiced resistance against caste oppression. Gaddar, as a popular Dalit performer, was invited to inaugurate the historic meeting. Amidst the emotional and outraged crowd, he composed and performed the song called *Dalitāpululammā Kāramacedu* (Dalit Tigers of Karamchedu). The song goes like this: *O Dalit Tigers—O Dalit Tigers/ You fought and stood against/ The landlords of Karamchedu/ O Dalit Tigers—O Dalit Tiger*. The song openly attacked the upper-caste hegemony and praised the courage of the Dalits of Karamchedu for their assertion. With this daring song, which was uncommon in those days, Gaddar emerged as a hero and a symbol of assertion for the thousands of Dalits.

In 1985, the government imposed an undeclared ban on People’s War and its affiliated organizations like JNM. Gaddar along with JNM had to go underground. During his underground days, Gaddar worked as a squad-commander and an artist of the People’s War Group. He wrote and performed several songs, including a song on a day in the squad life of a guerrilla (Giri Interview 2008). While roaming as a guerrilla in the forests of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, he was influenced by the Adivasi society and performed songs about their lives and struggles. On witnessing the destitution of the *Lambadā* Adivasi community, particularly the horrid practice of girl trafficking, he wrote a song in which a *Lambada* goes to market to sell firewood but sells their daughter instead (Giri Interview 2008).

In 1990, the Congress Government led by Chenna Reddy lifted the ban on the People’s War. A JNM team came overground and performed at a huge rally in Hyderabad and Warangal in February 1991. With the Chundururu Dalit massacre of 1991 in which eight members of the Dalit community were killed by the upper-castes, Gaddar became

the biggest mobilizing force of the Dalits in that region. The development also shows the way Gaddar embodied several voices and emerged as a spokesperson for the fragmented oppressed communities. He got further empathy from the people when he was shot at by police officers and survived with bullets in his body in 1997. Before the incident, Gaddar had already annoyed the state by forming the Committee to Claim Encounter Dead Bodies (on the model of Mothers of Missing in Latin America). Since the period saw the killing of hundreds of Naxalites by the state in fake encounters, Gaddar as the convenor of the committee exposed several fake encounters and forced court and human right institutions to hand over bodies to the family members with due respect. While these acts outraged the state, they also made him popular among the lower sections of the society.

The comical irony with folk tune is the hallmark of Gaddar's performance. Though Gaddar does not hesitate to celebrate the land and labour of the people, in a sudden moment, he draws our attention to the irony embedded in this celebration. His song, *Bhārat Apnī Mahān Bhūmī* is a pertinent example of this irony:

Let's listen to the story

Of *Bhārāta* which is our great land O brother

In this land which is 'richly-watered, richly-fruited'

Why is food (bread) so costly, Tell me O brother? [7]

Most of Gaddar's songs are interwoven in a dialectical manner. They contradict high and low, tragedy and comedy, idealism and materialism and the rhetoric of democracy to the deliverance of democracy. The songs carry the contradictions not only in narratives but also through the contradictions of the artistic forms, through tune, rhythm and movements. To illustrate, Gaddar's singing is accompanied by a sudden break of labour rhythm, which he generates after beating his chest or suddenly stopping the movement and freezing his body, for example, by exclaiming *hā or ho*. Kumar noted that this *haa*, not only gives breathing time for the artist, but also breaks the continuity. This

kind of discontinuity for a moment may provoke his audience to think rather than carry on emotionally with his song ('Untouchable Spring'). His song, *Ammā Telengana akalikekala ganamā*, is an exemplary example of this dialectical playfulness of the suffering, the struggle and the hope:

This is the story of Telengana/ A story of pain/
Of suffering/ of struggle/the promise of a nation/
And of hope/of a people/still seeking justice (Gaddar '*Ammā Telengana*') [8]

With beautiful folk tunes taken from the community, the song touches the core of our hearts and forces one to think about the social situation. Such folk tunes and bodily rhythms are again reminders of the labour production relationship. Gaddar believes that the folk tunes provide self-identification of the artists with the people and the community. But as soon as the audience starts developing serious empathy with these folk tunes, he enters into comical interludes that break their empathy by mocking the powerful or the dominant sections. His song on Sai Baba—*Sayibaabo sannayi babo*— is one such example in which he satirically asks *Sai bābā*, a corporate religious guru, to give pumpkins from his curly hair instead of golden rings, so that at least people can have basic food.¹²⁰ He, thus, attacks the middle-class's corporate-religious beliefs, for example, worshipping self-styled Gurus like Sai Baba mainly for material gains.

In Gaddar's performance, such irony becomes an element of politics as well as aesthetics. The irony carries what Rancière says is the distribution of the sensible in a more ironical (unequal) way. The irony in performance is carried out through the elements of tragicomedy, which at a time distances the spectators and creates empathy for the lower-sections. Nevertheless, the irony always gives space for self-criticism, self-reflexivity and inter-textuality for both the performers and the spectators. In this irony,

¹²⁰ The allegations labelled against *Sai bābā* include sexual abuse, money laundering, fraud and black money. *Sai bābā* also has huge fan clubs ranging from the upper-middle and corporate class including famous cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, Bollywood singer Lata Mangeshkar, former Indian Prime-Minister Narasimha Rao and others.

comedy and satire become important elements to expose the hegemonic power. Using these comical and satirical elements in a song ‘*Chor-Chittar*,’ he not only exposes the character of so-called ‘patriotic’ right-wing organizations but also their imperialist connection.¹²¹ A stanza of the song goes like this:

They are jolting us from America
 And we have been jolted in Ayodhya
 By preparing the procession of *Rāma*
 The carried out the [death] procession of the Republic
 What kind of selfless volunteers are they,
 Who are in the business of nationalism?
 What kind of nationalists are the
 Who take donation in Dollar?
 Theifs and scounderals are sitting there o brother
 Big setters are sitting there o brother [9]

Nevertheless, it is not only the powerful authority that become a target of Gaddar’s songs and performance, the oppressed communities also become a target of his satires. For instance, his song on an agricultural labourer—Lacumamma, while it appreciates her labour, it also mocks her belief of liberation through salvation.

On this note of the phenomenal success of Gaddar, it would be interesting to bring Kabir Suman into the discussion, who hails from a similar line of leading artists from West Bengal.¹²² Gaddar like Suman has brought out ‘distinctive changes on the physiognomy of the existing music accompanied by freshness of lyrics, poetic beauty, and biting satire’ (S. Chatterjee 93). Though their creative process and political

¹²¹ It is to be noted that right wing organization like *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP) are quite popular among the NRIs (Non-Resident Indian) in USA and many Caribbean countries. The organization gets huge donations from there.

¹²² Kabir Suman has been a member of a member of parliament of India on All India Trinamul Congress ticket in 2009. Often he has severe spat with his party and supported revolutionary activities.

engagement remain different, they also create many parallels and meet at various junctures. Kabir Suman has created music, as S. Chatterjee has suggested, ‘for/by/of the middle-class that stands its ground by simultaneously celebrating and critiquing its contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes’ (S.Chatterjee 94). Gaddar has created a parallel kind of music and songs for/by/of the labouring classes by celebrating and commenting on their contradictions. While he celebrates the labour of Lacumamma, he criticizes her for being superstitious. Suman is exposed to different variants of the music traditions of the world and draws heavily from all over the world, particularly from the Latin American music traditions. Gaddar, however, remains localized but he also draws from various regional cultures. Gaddar unlike Kabir Suman cannot risk ‘irritating’ his audiences because ultimately his aim is to politicize and embrace those audiences. In a similar way, while Suman maintains a detachment with his audience, Gaddar tries to become one of them by, what Dolan says, ‘locating one’s personal and political investments’ (417). This does not mean that Gaddar does not criticize his audiences; however, he does not seem to be as much critical as Suman. This might have also happened because Gaddar had to follow the guiding principles of his Maoist party line unlike Suman who can openly disparage all parties. Viewed from a revolutionary political performance perspective, Suman is right to say his middle-class audiences that ‘I will make you think, I will,’ who are becoming self-obsessed and stopped thinking about others. Gaddar cannot think about such criticisms for his audiences as his major audiences are coming from the oppressed-sections. Gaddar cannot take such risk as Suman.

S. Chatterjee notes that Kabir Suman in his composition is very much informed by the Frankfurt School—mainly its theories of culture and aesthetics. Gaddar hugely draws from local Bardic and *Bhakti* saint traditions. Though both do not so much expose each other’s culture, one can see a merger of Suman’s global aesthetic with Gaddar’s local aesthetics through the elements of satire, comedy, irony and ultimately in protest. Not

surprisingly, on many occasions both come together to protest against oppression and violence (e.g., both performed from a single platform against the Nandigram killing in Bengal, which was then ruled by the CPM government).

6. The Party, Cultural Wing and Labouring Artists

The first image of political theatre may be an impression of ‘boring’, ‘conceited’, ‘pedantic’, ‘mechanical’ and a ‘non-enjoyable theatre’ (Fo qtd. in Behan 1). This image is not entirely wrong. Commonly, political theatre in India like elsewhere largely tends to turn into a poster art or political statement. They tend to diminish the very dialogic process and democratic space of theatre. Largely drawing from folk performances, though JNM sets a new paradigm, but it cannot be said to be completely out of that conventional framework, particularly when it comes to the relationship between a left political party and its ‘cultural wing.’ Even in the case of JNM this relationship was not easy going. The relationship becomes more complex because of the presence of labouring lower caste artists.¹²³ In fact, the strength and failure of Gaddar and JNM has a lot to do with their relationship with the party and its cultural policies.

It is obvious from earlier studies that the relationship between a leftist party and its cultural organization has been not as smooth as it has been portrayed several times (Bharucha 1997; Sreejith 2005). There are several examples of this contentious conflicting relationship. Indian theatre artists like Ritwik Ghatak, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir and Nazar while working for the Communist Party of India (CPI) also felt disenchanted with the party’s understanding and problematic attitude towards art and culture. The history of IPTA is full of those discontents. On the one hand, many artists had indicated how IPTA ‘forsake formal excellence for propaganda’ (Bhattacharya 16). On the other hand, the artists’ ‘absolute freedom for expressing their talents’ was

¹²³ Earlier the problem was different in nature where middle-class urban artists tried to represent the labouring sections. Scholars have already discussed such ethics of representation in case of the IPTA.

criticized by the party (Documents qtd. in Bharucha *Rehearsals* 53-54). Ritwik Ghatak, a prominent IPTA member who later emerged as a significant film director saw this problem at the organization and functional level, not at the ideological level. In his thesis for IPTA—*On the Cultural Front*—submitted to the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1954, he argues that ‘the problem of [revolutionary] culture is basically the problem of organization at the levels of the Party, the Platform and Art’ (Ghatak 18). In the context of *Janakiya Samskārikā Vedi* (JSV) of Kerala, Sreejith has noted that ‘central to this conflict has been the debate over the relative primacy of culture or politics, and the question of autonomy of the former from the latter.’ While opposing the dominance of the political, such cultural organization also relies on the latter for the support (Sreejith 5333). The success of Gaddar and JNM cannot be thought without the party’s support.

There is no doubt that Indian Maoists in comparison to official communist parties (e.g., CPI and CPM) have recognized and given more importance to art and culture. Even their broader understanding of culture has been much better than the earlier understanding of the communist parties, especially in the context of understanding local language, culture and proximity to the society and community. But it is also true that even the Naxalites’ approach was not qualitatively different from their old condescending approach towards their cultural wings. As we know, the old approach gives primacy to economics and politics and places culture at the super-structural level.

Several JNM artists including Gaddar had been vocally critical of this party approach. From its inception in 1972, JNM was only considered as a cultural wing or front of the Party. It never had any structure like other mass fronts (e.g., Students’ organization or Women’s organization) which had their own independent structure and committee following the broader political guidelines. In the case of JNM, it was an arbitrary selection of leadership and direction by the Party, which JNM had to follow. After repeated requests from the JNM artists, the Party formed a committee to prepare a

cultural policy and perspective of PW and JNM. The committee was also assigned to write a document on the cultural policy of the party. However, some of the artists objected that none of the members in this committee was from JNM or experts from the field of culture (Gaddar qtd. in Y.Yadava 25). In the meantime, Gaddar had also prepared some of the documents, which were not accepted by the Party political leadership. Some of the JNM artists were also critical on issues of arrangement of performance in which the district team of JNM has to function under the control of the District Committee of the Party. Local teams did not have any connection with the JNM central team besides workshops and training. This approach hampered the artistic aspects and programs.

Moreover, there was a clear division between political activists and cultural activists. In the organizational hierarchy, the political activists were always taken more seriously than the cultural activists. This issue had already been felt and penned by many artists. The following is an excerpt from *Prerana*, a magazine of *Janakiya Samskarika Vedi* (JSV), a cultural wing of a Marxist-Leninist organization in Kerala:

Is the cultural activists inferior by birth. Is not the political activists viewing his cultural counterpart as Gulliver would a Liliput. Is it justified that somebody who has learnt the party programme by heart and who has fortuitously achieved some success in one or two struggles should get more recognition than the cultural activists [*sic*] (Prerana qtd. in Sreejith 5336)

In my discussion with JNM artists, I also felt that this realization was more for the JNM artists who already came from the ‘inferior by birth’ category. The division was very visible in the Maoist organizational structure. While most of the leadership of PWG had upper-castes and feudal background before their joining of the movement, most of the leadership of JNM came from the labouring lower-castes background. This was certainly

not a deliberate division; however, this division was very much embedded in the organizational structure of the party.

There are several examples available, where some brilliant artists of JNM were asked to leave the cultural work to do the ‘serious’ political work. Many times, JNM as a cultural wing was considered as a platform to politicize people to take part only in the political activities. More than that whenever there was state repression, the JNM artists were asked to take part in the political activities and leave their cultural work for the time being (Y. Yadav 26). Similarly, many of the artists used were called only on the day of the performance. In the continuation of a similar tendency, in a very Platonic sense, according to some of the JNM artists, the party somewhere believed that poet and artists should not become leaders (as, allegedly, they never tend to be deeply serious about political issues). K.G. Satyamurty, a Maoist ideologue and the second in command in the Peoples War and a famous Dalit poet, was demoted from the general secretary of the PWG because the party felt that *because of his poetic heart he was not able to handle the serious political issues* (emphasis added). Varavara Rao, an intellectual and poet close to the PWG leadership had to say that,

Satyamurthy was a good poet but when people went to him with real problems, he would quote poetry and say things like ‘no matter how many big trees fall, the wind will never stop’. The truth is, SM [Satyamurty] failed when he was asked to lead (Varavara Rao qtd. in ‘Casting A Dark Shadow’).

What lies at the heart of the matter is the Platonic pitfall of a revolutionary party’s approach to art and culture. I will argue that the primacy of one over the other has been one of the banal debates in the revolutionary theatre and performance traditions along with the issues of form and content. These debates persist because the dialectical relationship and interconnection between art, politics and culture, and for that matter form

and content are downplayed. In fact, art and politics cannot be compared as there is an artistic criterion and there is a political criterion (at least in terms of methods) at the same time both are about the distribution of the sensible.

In other words, art and politics have different modes of articulation and expression, which do not necessarily represent the matching and contradictory viewpoints. Many any times, they fulfil two different purposes for an audience: while the artistic elements provide spiritual and creative imagination, the political elements show critical thinking. However, one should not just erase the differences between these two categories (art/culture and politics). This is because, as Ghatak analyses, ‘the impact on the cultural sphere is not felt in the same way as in the political sphere and should not be given expression in the same way’ (31). At the same time, setting primacy of one over the other would be an instrumental approach. Ghatak rightly clarifies that these ‘problems are of an organizational, not ideological nature’ (19). The organizational structure has been one of the major problems, which created this kind of division between art and politics.

Moreover, the problems with Gaddar and JNM are also of a different nature, which the party failed to understand under the slogan of writers, and artists are a product of revolution. First, while the Naxalites Party sees caste and culture as part of superstructure, Gaddar sees caste and cultural [injustices] as embedded in the base of the Indian society. Secondly, labouring artists of the lived experiences cannot be viewed as an individual artist. As pointed out, as the JNM artists rather stand for their community and therefore, his assertion needs to be viewed in a different light as an individual representing a community. Not surprisingly, Gaddar has remained a severe critic of the party’s policies on the question of caste and cultural approach. This was one of the reasons (apart from his writing songs for a film and starting a school) for his being expelled from the Party for six months (Gaddar qtd. in Giri Interview). This happened when Gaddar penned six songs for a movie called *Ore Rickshaw*. Varavara Rao was of

the view that ‘imperialist technology’ cannot be used in a people's movement. He argued that the use of audio tapes and films corrupt the message a revolutionary movement has in mind (Pillai ‘Songs of Revolution’). According to some other sources, Gaddar refuted the charges by arguing that first, he did not take any money for penning the songs for *Ore Rickshaw*. Second, he refuted the logic of imperialist technology by asking, ‘will you throw the Television sets out when the revolution will come?’ He explained to me that this is an instrumental approach otherwise the problem does not lie with the technology but with what this technology produces (Gaddar Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011). While PWG has been quite critical of Gaddar’s ‘individualist’ functioning and independent leadership, Gaddar had to say that the party was deliberately trying to ignore him. This happened when the stature of Gaddar had somewhat undermined the stature of the party’s cultural wing and people in large numbers started following Gaddar’s style of singing and dancing. While Gaddar has remained loyal to his party, he has also refused to toe the party line on many issues by saying that ‘the artist is not above the party but the artist is also not a dancer to the party’s tune’ (Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011). Interestingly, both the party and Gaddar refer back to Mao to substantiate their claim. While the party stresses that ‘literature and art are subordinate to politics,’ Gaddar stresses on Mao’s next sentence ‘how literature and art in turn exert a great influence on politics’ (Yenan Talk); the dialectical relationship between art and politics is undermined.

Here, I would like to acknowledge that in their revolutionary effort, Maoist has been successful in bridging the gap between the ‘penpoint’ and the ‘gunpoint’. However, the gap between the pen and drum still remains. And it would not be an exaggeration to say that unless the drum’s language should also become the language of revolutionary politics, the people with the drum will feel alienated. Similarly, the allegation of the ‘individualist’ functioning of artists needs to be problematized considering the lived experiences and labouring lower-caste background of the artists.

7. JNM's New Approach and Ethics of Theorising

When I first used the term 'Gaddarian approach' in a seminar, a respondent there showed his disagreement with the term and its scope. Despite agreeing with the significant contribution made by Gaddar and JNM, he refused to consider the Gaddarian approach as an approach. He questioned the very foundation of such approaches. Believing that the respondent was in disagreement regarding the nature of Gaddar's original contribution, I asked him, 'But why is it so? If Brecht's and Boal's method can be seen as an approach, then why cannot Gaddar's method?' He said, 'You know, unlike Brecht and Boal, Gaddar does not write and theorise his practices. It, therefore, begs the question: 'But what about if Gaddar articulates and speaks about his approach?'

Academic scholars from various other disciplines tend to be reluctant in considering experiential knowledge as a theory, even after knowing that 'experience plays an important epistemological role in production of thought' (Guru and Sarukkai 2). This paradox of theorization lies at the very heart of the existing theorizing. This has precisely to do with what Guru observes about the practice of social sciences in India:

Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy, dividing it into the vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and the privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity that makes them intellectually superior to the former. [...] This pernicious dichotomy indicates the lack of egalitarian conditions in social science practice in the country. (10)

However, this understanding is not limited to the social sciences but equally persists in humanities and other disciplines, which needs to be challenged. In this regard, Conquergood has suggested that a performance studies is well 'suited for the challenge of

braiding together disparate and stratified way of knowing' ('Performance Studies' 152).

According to Conquergood:

A Performance Studies agenda should collapse this divide between theory and experience and revitalize the connection between artistic accomplishment, analysis, and articulations with communities; between practical knowledge (knowing how), propositional knowledge (knowing that and political savvy (knowing who, when, where). [...] The ongoing challenge of performance studies is to refuse and supersede this deeply entrenched division of labour, apartheid of knowledges that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualising and creating. ('Performance' 153)

Related to this, Brenda Beck has argued that Indian folk bards need to be taken as sociologists, as they imply their own richly developed worldviews to organize, interweave and interpret human events; she argues:

Their segmentation of story scenes, their use of stock characters and their selection of specific details for repetition, all provide important clues to a traditional and a cultural-specific view of human motives. Each tale-teller shares this interpretation with many audiences, lending ever-new popularity and authenticity to the perspectives involved. Professional minstrels are not just amateur poets and entertainers. These people are skilled social analysts and teachers. Furthermore, in India, story-telling continues to have a direct impact on public attitudes. (35)

Considering Beck's view in consideration, it can be said that Gaddar and other such artists not only entertain but also visualise their approach towards culture and community. In his formulation on the ethics of theorizing, Guru somewhere accepted that the Dalit and other lower-caste lack the insight of theories. He interestingly observes that it is the material context with appropriate conditions that shapes reflective abilities among individual or groups. Reflective abilities for theory [*academic theory*], according to Guru, develop only in certain kinds of labour processes. Guru observes that if the labour processes are 'imaginative, innovative, and interesting,' then they provide sufficient scope for the agent to reflect continuously on the tools of production (14). Ghettoisation of society resulted in the loss of the confidence that is so important in developing the theoretical potential in the social sciences. However, Gaddar and the artists of JNM, despite coming from ghettos have been part of the revolutionary movement, and of course, carry reflective abilities to an extent for theory, which even Guru cannot deny. Again, performers like Gaddar are trying to theorise their own practices in their own way. Then the question comes: can we deny their theorisation only because they do not theorise in a pure academic language? The acceptance of a Gaddarian approach is also important because Guru says that 'Dalits are expected to take the initiative in giving moral lead to doing theory in the country' (Guru 28). This would also be an important step to 'remove the cultural hierarchies' that tend to divide a discipline into 'theoretical' and 'empirical' divisions. I think by theorising his practice, Gaddar was able to fulfil two purposes. On the one hand, as a Marxist ideologue, he has translated technical content into ordinary idioms and common speech to make it accessible to the common people. On the other hand, by connecting lived experiences and experiential knowledge to the public sphere discourse he has been able to theorise those lived experiences for the middle-class and other working class sections.

Viewed from such a performance studies perspective, Gaddar and JNM have definitely contributed towards a new approach, which breaks the entrenched divisions and closures. Secondly, Gaddar has been able to popularise a theory, which was considered an exclusive space for a small elite section of society. Even in terms of theory, the Gaddarian approach can be read as a radical theoretical intervention because as Sarukkai comprehends it ‘theory is to be felt, is to embody suffering and pain, is to relate the epistemological with the emotional—that is, is to bring together reason and emotion’ (Guru and Sarukkai 45). In light of the above, I argue that the Gaddarian approach indeed works as a theory and has provided some interesting leads to both the performance theories and theories on marginalisation. Gaddar’s theoretical discourse posits ‘*māttī chetulu* (hands that turn mud into food) as the source of all production and social existence, combines Marxism and Ambedkarism to show how the *māttī manuśulu* (human beings who have constant interaction with soil and nature—SCs, STs and OBCs).’ (Ilaiah ‘Bard’ 48). At the same time Ilaiah pointed out how this sections are alienated from their very being through institutions such as caste, class, patriarchy and the state’(48). Here, I discuss the fundamentals of the Gaddarian approach and its new contribution.

8. The Development of a New Aesthetic

In the development of aesthetics, Augusto Boal has remarked that,

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case a catharsis occurs, in the second an awakening of critical consciousness. (122)

Extending the Brechtian paradigm of critical consciousness through theatre, Boal proposes a theatrical paradigm in which the spectator becomes the 'spect-actor'. As a 'spect-actor', they change the dramatic action and train themselves for real action; in such practice-based performance, in Boal's dictum, theatre becomes a rehearsal for revolution (122). But what happens when theatre goes beyond rehearsal or stage and completely ruptures the dramatic and real action? For instance, what happens when theatre crosses the theatrical space and becomes part of the political movement, when the politically motivated people provide chorus to a performance? Does the role of theatre end there and should the actors return? It becomes challenging to study JNM in the existing paradigm of a political theatre approach, which, at its best, conceptualizes theatre and performance as a rehearsal for revolution. But how does one go about conceptualizing an action in which a bullet hits a performer and the performer dies while singing the song of revolution while the death is real. Here, the theatrical performance does not remain confined to the rehearsals or representation of revolution rather it becomes part of the revolution and an act of the revolution in itself.

In a Gaddarian approach, the role of the spectator is transformed into a political action. In the dialectic of the real and theatrical, the theatre gets a reality and the reality gets theatricalized (rise of class-conflict for instance). The role of theatre goes beyond the dictum and dramatic character and directly intervenes in socio-political life. Both actors and spectators become the actors and leaders, and dissolve the existing bourgeois boundary between culture and politics and politics and aesthetics. So should we even call such a performance a [theatrical] rehearsal of revolution or theatre of revolution? I argue that the performance and practice of JNM breaks several such normative conventions of our understanding of political theatre, folk performances, and the relationship between theatre and performance and revolutionary movement.

In the context of popular political theatre, Conquergood argues that instead of aesthetic distance and other concepts of elite theatre, ‘popular theatre is contingent upon ‘identification’ and ‘consubstantiality’ (‘Book Review’). This is why after watching Gaddar and JNM’s performances, people in large numbers, are motivated to join the revolutionary people’s movement. At the same time, it does not mean that estrangement is necessarily a concept of elite theatre and that JNM does not use the technique of estrangement (aesthetic distance) in its performances. As a folk performer, Gaddar himself uses non-realist actions and most of the folk forms used by JNM are intrinsically similar in nature. I do not claim that all traditional theatre and performances in India are essentially Brechtian (at least technically) in nature. But most of the folk forms used by JNM are Brechtian in nature with a joker and other narrators ridiculing and questioning the narration presented by the main narrator. Also, on the level of acting, not a single *bhāva* (emotion) is used predominantly for a long time in a single performance.

The next point that is very important in the context of Gaddar and JNM is related to their influences from Marxist philosophical and theatrical traditions. Arguably, Gaddar is a major artist of the Marxist tradition after Brecht who has systematically adapted and developed a Marxist vocabulary of analysis in the field of theatre and performance.¹²⁴ If Brecht translated ‘alienation’, ‘dialectics’ and ‘class consciousness’ in theatrical languages, then Gaddar translated the Marxist-Leninist perspectives of ‘masses to masses’, ‘unity of dialectics’ and ‘the art and artist from below’.

The Gaddarian approach can be considered as a sum or synthesis of several approaches — aesthetic, communication, linguistic and ethnographic approaches. All these individual approaches are can be used independently, interactively, conflictingly and interweavily. Gaddar has attempted to theorise JNM’s performance through some of

¹²⁴ Though there have been several artists who have been influenced by Marxist traditions of theatre, particularly by Brechtian legacy and phraseology, I do not know of any other artist who has systematically used Marxist vocabulary in their approaches.

the key-concepts of the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist understanding. These key-concepts are from the masses to the masses, a unity of dialectics, art and artists from below and the leadership of the proletariat.

From the Masses to Masses

When I went to meet Gaddar and other JNM artists in Hyderabad and nearby areas in January 2011, the region was under the grip of the Telangana movement. On one such busy day, I had an appointment for an interview with Gaddar. An activist friend accompanied me. Together, we reached the Telangana *Praja* Front office (TPF) around noon, but Gaddar was still out busy with the political campaign. After sometime, he entered, looking tired and sweaty. His eyes indicated that he might not have slept for several days. He welcomed me, and asked whether I had lunch. Even though I told him I am full, he insisted by saying, ‘No, I am going to eat and so you must have something at least.’ As he was very tired, he requested me to leave my questionnaire with him or come some other time. Though I was not very happy at the request, I pretended otherwise. Perhaps he read my mind. While eating, he asked if he could take a look at the questionnaire, I had prepared for him. He read the questionnaire; but instead of replying to those questions, he began to ask about my background, my village, and the performative traditions there and about the kind of songs people sing there. He enthusiastically enquired about the caste and class background of people who sing and perform. He asked whether there had been transformations in the village culture and how often and on what occasions they perform? He asked about the impact of migration and globalization on the performance genres in my village and whether my village was impacted by revolutionary movement, whether women and lower-castes participated in performances and also their condition in the village, their sources of livelihood and the

literacy rate amongst them. I enjoyed sharing information with him and was struck by his modesty.

What I have observed in my interactions with most of the JNM artists is that they are humble and respectful towards others. It helps them to create a democratic space where a proper and equal dialogue can take place. As a curious ‘researcher’ and ‘ethnographer’, Gaddar asked me about many things. He asked about my perspective and understanding on the performance genres in my villages, listening to me keenly and without interrupting. Suddenly, he informed me that it was my turn to ask questions. His spontaneous decision surprised me; and another round of discussion followed. After that, I went to meet some other JNM artists; and after interacting with them, I realized that this is an approach common to almost all JNM artists when they interact with people. I was informed about this earlier also, in an interview with Narasing Rao. In that interview, besides other things, Narasing Rao told me about the way JNM artists approach people, ‘We (JNM artists) always try to listen to the people first. You have to listen to their problems, their stories, their histories and heroes and their song and tunes, angers and frustrations’ (Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011). According to him, this is what provided raw material for people’s performances. In this context, D. V. Rao pointed out that Gaddar’s ear is possessed by people’s tunes (200). Gaddar has also added that how could one become a people’s artist without listening to people, without understanding their emotion? He gave the example of Subbarao Panigrahi, who despite coming from a different background (a Brahmin by caste), was able to connect with people because he not only listened to them but also expressed solidarity with their struggles. He maintains that it is ‘only by using people’s language, people’s tune, going to the people, living with them, dying for them that you can become one among them’ (Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011).

According to Gaddar, the ear is not a passive recipient. In fact, of all the other sense, the ear is the most important one, 'If your ear does not hear properly, the mind refuses to work' (Gaddar qtd. in dv rao). He argues that whatever JNM has produced, they have taken from existing people's culture. The masses to masses approach has four stages: collecting materials from people's lives, adapting people's forms and storing the collecting materials in their forms, revolutionizing the contents and forms and going back to the people to perform. According to Gaddar, they have not produced anything original and new as such. However, D.Venkat Rao argues that by rewriting, reconfiguring, recomposing song and performance, JNM has [definitely] created something new (Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011). This process of learning from the masses reflects what Brecht says about popular theatre, that it is, 'intelligible to the masses, adapting and enriching their forms of expression, assuming their standpoint, conforming and correcting it [...] relating to their traditions and developing them' (108).

Unity of Dialectics

When I asked about form and content in a revolutionary performance, Gaddar quoted this long passage of Mao and emphasized the unity of form and content.

What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically. Therefore, we oppose both the tendency to produce works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency towards the 'poster and slogan style', which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power (Mao156)

The experiment of JNM shows that revolutionary content is a basic substance required in revolutionary political theatre. This is exemplified by the fact that initially JNM had adapted plays without making any changes in their forms. Subsequently, Mao's theory of the unity of dialectics in the practice of art becomes the theoretical basis for JNM. The approach demands the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. The unity of dialectic also becomes the basis of *abhinaya* (acting)—for example the unity of *karūṇa* (pity) rasa and *vīra* (valour) rasa. It is commonly observed that political theatre over-emphasizes politics, while not keeping artistic aspects in mind.

According to Gaddar, JNM believes that if a work lacks in artistic power, then its revolutionary politics suffers. At the same time, even if a work of art is lacking in politics, then also its revolutionary politics suffers (Personal Interview 27 Jan. 2011). For this reason, he has been very critical even of the Indian Maoist cultural approach, which only shows its concern for politics but tends to ignore the artistic and aesthetic factors. Gaddar has observed that this unity is difficult to realize but when armed struggle takes place and artists become part of that struggle, then often a unity of dialectics comes spontaneously and involuntarily. At the time, I was very surprised by this kind of assertion of JNM artists and felt that this must be a kind of exaggeration that armed struggle provides the best unity between form and content. But thinking through corporealities and choreography and after watching the videos of the performance I have realized how armed struggle, through corporealities became part of the performance. Choreography of the body itself becomes content and breaks the essentialized division based on form and content. Conquergood points out that the ongoing challenge of performance studies is 'to revitalize the connection or unity between artistic accomplishments, analyses, and articulations with communities, between intellectual labour and manual labour'

(‘Performance Studies’ 320). Through their performance, Gaddar and JNM rupture these entrenched divisions.

Art and Artists from Below

The third most important and radical aspect of the Gaddarian approach (which also makes the organization different from others) is the concept of ‘art from below’ and the ‘artist from below’ for the proletariat art. One of the major contribution of JNM lies in the selection of the artistic materials which work among the ‘below’ sections. Despite being part of a Marxist political formation, which puts emphasis on objective conditions, JNM gives equal emphasis on proximity. Proximity becomes both an epistemological and practical point of departure and return in the Gaddarian approach. Proximity does not deny objectivity; rather the objective becomes more visible through proximity, which otherwise would have remained hidden in the artificiality of objectivity. This socio-economic background of the JNM artists provides a greater scope for engaged knowledge and leaves little scope for what Gramsci calls ‘intellectual error’, ‘believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned’ (418). By putting emphasis on the artists from below or artists with the lived experiences, the approach does not seem to say that others cannot participate in a revolutionary culture. What needs to be stressed, however, following Kidd’s argument, is that the artists from below may be involved in producing a performance (acting in plays and singing songs), but unless they control the selection and the whole educational process, they may become willing accomplices in their own domestication. In the context of popular [people’s] theatre, Kidd argues that ‘participation as mere performance is no guarantee of progressive change: unless rural villagers control the popular theatre process they may be used as mere mouthpieces for ideas produced by others’ (Kidd qtd. in Srampical 42). Even while performing and touring villages, the JNM team participates in manual labour.

JNM artists thus make effort to bridge the gap, which exists in left political and cultural praxis. By sharing their own life stories, artists easily connect with the lower sections of society. In this process, the socio-economic background of artists and their sense of artistic self get a renewed meaning in performance, which, otherwise, is seen to be lacking in middle-class conceptions of marginality, morality and representation. This Gaddarian approach of using the language and symbols from below is reflected in the following lines: ‘The swarm of ants has moved/the snake’s heart is shaken with fear./ The sheep have pounced/ the wolves have turned tail/The herds of cows have moved/ the tigers have begun to flee’ (JNM *Āgadu*).

Not debated much in postcolonial writings due to several reasons, language has always been at the heart of social struggles in India, from the *Bhakti* movement to the Dalit-Adivasi and nationalities movements.¹²⁵ Gaddar argues that Dalit performers excel in JNM because they write in their own language, dialect, and in their own rhythm and tune, about their own lives and struggles. One can understand this strategy as a turn from text to contexts, the political strategy was ‘how to move spectators to feel, to think and most importantly to act’ (Westlake 12). Most importantly, Gaddar in his revolutionary approach tries to ‘liberate poetry from the printed and private sphere. By liberating poetry Gaddar has enriched both poetry and theatre’ (Shivaprakash ‘Class-Notes’). Kumar argues that Gaddar not only liberated poetry but also countered the hegemony of print culture. At the same time, by printing songs, Gaddar and JNM have challenged another face of hegemony, which exists in the form of intellectual writing. The Gaddarian approach has deeply indigenized the Marxist political theatre in the Indian context and carried out a new level of engagement.

¹²⁵ Scholars’ own language background and social positioning do not allow taking a radical position.

Songs and Language from Below

Song is the most powerful weapon of JNM. Somashekar has noted that a beautifully fluid application of traditional poetic essence to a radical metamorphosis in the concepts has provided a framework for JNM's songs, which is firmer and stronger than any of the conventional beams and allegorical girders (Somashekar 1570). The songs used in JNM are very satirical and easy to adapt and sing. They depict the day-to-day lives of the workers, peasants, students, employees, women, Dalit and Adivasi; for example, the song written on railway workers, rickshaw-pullers, poor-policemen and about corruption and rising prices became a classic among common people. JNM also publishes songbooks that have a wide circulation. In the Gaddarian approach, the politics of languages becomes vital. JNM believes that the selection of language is a selection of class and community. The importance of this statement should not be seen as being restricted to the selection of language. It also questions the politics of the form of language and language's connection with labour. It penetrates deeper levels of language where sound and emotion reside. The languages of revolutionary theatre within the framework of the Gaddarian approach should be dictated by the languages and artists from the below. JNM artists due to their socio-economic background have adopted that language and symbols.

Most of the JNM artists write in their own languages. For instance, two major composers, Gaddar and Vangapandu write their songs and plays in lower-caste languages. Kancha Illaih observes that JNM uses the basic Dalit-*Bahujan* language, idiom, and symbolism by completely transforming the linguistic structure of literary Telugu. According to him:

Before Gaddar emerged on the Telugu revolutionary literature scenes, most writers belonged to the upper-caste/middle-class and landlord background. Their Telugu was rooted in Sanskrit while

Gaddar's writings draw upon linguistic structures, idioms, proverbs and euphemisms of illiterate, productive masses—what is more, of Telengana dialect which finds no place in written texts. (45-46)

Besides, these key formulations, the leadership of the proletariat and localization of aesthetics were important in the development of a new aesthetic. According to Ghatak,

The question of leadership is very important in a revolution. It is, we think, inseparable bound with the question of the party, its cadre, its method and extent of work. But no less is the question of the people and the words that stir their hearts. Words that remind them that one among them has risen and is speaking, declaring what *they* were vaguely sensing. (54)

Drawing from Ivor L. Miller's study of religious symbols in Cuban Political Performance (2000), I would like to argue that by sharing a symbolic language created from the legacy of local historical experiences, JNM's use demonstrates a leader's ties to the local community and material situation. We can see that leadership of the proletariat (labouring body) has provided a greater edge to JNM over other groups.

9. Labouring Body in Performance and Aesthetic Function

So do people join a revolutionary movement and picked up arms because they were hallucinating? No doubt, one of the main reasons behind the success of JNM was its espousal of the political perspective of the 'land to the tillers' movement and the armed struggle. Supporting issues such as land to the tillers, proper wages for agricultural labourers, strong action against caste-gender oppression, along with other local issues, helped JNM to reach out to the various sections of society whose concerns did not get addressed in the earlier movements, for example, in the nationalist struggle. Unlike the

issues of national independence and the rise of fascism (the main contents of IPTA's plays), the labouring bodies found more appeal in JNM because it presents their immediate concerns of land and labour. But apart from political reasons, which are in no way any less important, aesthetic played a vital role in moving the spectators beyond the 'rehearsals'. Indeed the synthesis of politics and aesthetic played an important role in the success of JNM. But how could this identification occur in a society where the category of the oppressed cannot be seen as being homogenous.

JNM, through their performances, fostered a sense of commonality and solidarity based on the common languages of oppression shared by many. With this sense of commonality, different labouring caste communities could identify with each other despite their numerous differences. JNM artists who came from different caste and class backgrounds, closely worked together to become a group of 'consubstantial' actors. Burke argues that the consubstantial group finds identification in common efforts towards a specific goal, which in turns becomes a way of life (41). This is evident by the fact that most of the artists are full time artists and revolution becomes a way of life for them. Here performance is used as rhetoric by performers to form attitudes or induce action with respect to other human agents (Burke 41). Coming from a common oppressed background and using their performance culture, JNM artists are able to create a strong sense of identification, which leads to effective methods of persuasion. On the call of the JNM artists, people were persuaded to join the revolutionary movement because they possessed 'familial consubstantiality' – their place in a common context strengthened by traditional ancestral links through the village and caste communities (Burke101-102). The positionality was also important here as this act is 'a gesture towards placing oneself within a critique of objectivity' (Dolan 417). For example, many artists who have joined JNM were from Gaddar's own village and community. In the case of JNM, 'the agent (performer) was made possible by harnessing the agency from people' (D.V. Rao

Personal Interview 27 Dec. 2010). People have joined in strong numbers because they can easily identify with the agent. ‘Unless you become one among the people, you cannot make people move. And also, why should they move with you?’ asks Gaddar.

Since a JNM performance embodies the tragedy and violence of its times through an enactment of power against the state and hegemonic structures in which the agent’s action involves a corresponding passion, ‘from the sufferance of the passion there arises an understanding of the act’ (Burke 38). He makes a distinction between the dramatic (attitude as a preparation for action) and the lyrical (attitude as substitute for action):

In drama, there is the intense internal debate prior to the moment of decision. Upon the outcome of this debate depends the course of history. But from the lyric point of view, the state of arrest is itself an end-product, a resolution of previous action rather than a preparation for subsequent action. (245)

These points become complex with regard to JNM because it uses both dramatic and lyrical dialogue. In other words, in most cases, the dramatic forms are lyrical. So, can we say that the plays of JNM do not give space for debating decisions; or does it not go through the rehearsal process at all? All of these questions may be true but again one needs to make a difference between dramatic and lyrical form according to the cultural context. Scholars like Krishnadev Upadhyay and Tirumal Rao argued that in major cases Indian folk performances are story-song mixed and have dramatic elements along with lyrical elements (*Lokasāhitya* 61; T. Rao Personal Interview 3 Jan. 2011). In fact, there is a unity of dramatic and lyrical form in Gaddar and JNM’s performance, which gives it a Brehctian structure and leaves less space for the manipulation of decision. It is to be noticed that most of the folk genres that JNM has adopted are epical in nature.

The motive and persuasion can also be understood by five key words used by Burke: Act (what was done), Scene (the background of the act), Agent (who did it),

Agency (how they did it) and Purpose (why they did it) (xv). Burke argues that by using the scene in the sense of a background, and act in the sense of action, we can say that ‘the scene contains the act’. Further, using ‘agents’ in the sense of actors, we can say that the scene contains the agents (3). If we take the example of JNM’s *Kāramchedu Dalitā pululu*, we can say that the performance was enacted against the background of the massacre of the Dalits in Karamchedu village, which enraged the Dalit audiences in the region. While the scene (the real background) contains the act, the act (dramatic act) contains the scene in performance. Both act and agent required the scene (the objective conditions), otherwise people might not have responded in the same way (e.g., if Telangana were a rich region). Poor and lower-castes responded better also because the songs and performances provided proximity.

Finally, JNM has been successful in achieving its aim to a greater extent because it successfully fused the synthesized disentangled elements along with the synthesis of identities and genres. According to Alexander, the fusion of disentangled elements is one of the main conditions behind the success of such performances. In a fused performance, ‘audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective mise-en-scene and ‘performance becomes convincing and effective—more ritual like’ (527; 529).¹²⁶ If we say that, there is a difference between ‘ritual-like’ and ‘ritual,’ then it is similar to the difference between Gaddar as a shaman and a shaman in ritual. When JNM performs at the death of the martyrs, their performances create a sense of ritual-effectiveness. Alexander notes:

Ritual effectiveness [in performance] energises the participants
and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with
the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the

¹²⁶ Performances fail when this relinking process is incomplete: the elements of performance remain apart, and social action seems inauthentic and artificial, failing to persuade (Alexander 527).

connection of the participants and symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant community at large. (527)

Ramanujan also notes that folk poetics, unlike the elite *Rasā*-poetics do not insist so much on the distinction between poet and character, *at least not in that way* (emphasis added): ‘Bard and character, bard and audience, bard and actor, actor and character are merged at crucial moments and separated at ordinary times’ (*Three Hundred Ramayanas* 509). He says that a folk performance provides the experience of such a merger in different degrees (509). One can say that audience merges in different degrees with the JNM plays and performances and in political participation.

10. Conclusion

JNM’s Gaddarian approach demands a 3D process of decolonization, debrahmanisation, and de-elitisation—of not only politics, culture and language but of the very idea of political theatre and cultural movement. Simultaneously, the approach demands the aesthetic from below. Not surprisingly, in Gaddar’s performances, ‘the condemned life styles of the Dalits transformed into a symbol of protest’ (Kumar 38). The same can be said about his songs and performances regarding women, working class, Adivasi communities, and various marginal symbols whose statuses are condemned in society. For example, he has written songs about slippers (*kirrū kirrū seppuloyāmmā!*), a garbage bin (*ventā cakkagunnadī*) and shit (*Sundarangī Paikhānā*) (K. Kumar 38). By performing the unrecognized and the condemned, he brings the extreme peripheral to the centre. These condemned materials have always been associated with a particular caste and the marginalized sections of Indian society. The engagement of labouring bodies with these materials gives meaning to their culture and performances. By privileging these material objects, Gaddar expresses their social purpose, and in a way, articulates the political rights of the marginalized. By writing songs on these ‘lowly’ objects, ‘he made

an effort to bring dignity and respect to these things and so to the untouchables' (Kumar 'Untouchable Spring'). While he gives a new status to the condemned symbols and identity, he remains one of the most severe critics of all existing hegemonic institutions.

Ilaiah succinctly paraphrases his criticism. For Gaddar:

Family is a *magoni rajyam* (man's kingdom), caste is a Brahmin *rajyam* (kingdom of Brahmins) and the state is an *agrakula dopidi rajyam* (kingdom of upper-caste exploitation). In all these institutions, power relations are moulded so as to serve the interests of the strong. We, women burn as cigars in the mouths of men, if a girl is born on a no-moon day, the mother is forced to throw her away). (Ilaiah 'Bard' 48-49)

As a leader, Gaddar has theorised the art and artists from a below approach. Though in the first instance, the idea of artists from below and art from below looks like what Bharucha calls 'othering' and 'authenticating', however, in JNM, the idea has helped in 'igniting' and informing the critical consciousness of artists (*Rehearsals* 107).

EPILOGUE

There is no closure to people's songs; it is *tārāgānī*
(inexhaustible). (Gaddar 'Tārāganī' 48-50)

There may not be a closure for people's songs and performances but a thesis certainly needs a closure at a point of time. Before I close, I would like to summarise some of the major issues I have discussed in my thesis. The summary also gives me a space to reflect back on those issues. A few years back in 2005, responding to my presentation on *Jana Nāṭyā Maṇḍalī* (JNM), a fellow classmate asked me, 'Do you think this is a performance to be studied under theatre studies department?' I was silent, as I did not have any theoretical and conceptual framework to substantiate my studies on such performances under the theatre studies department. Of course, he was of the view that JNM's performance cannot be considered as 'theatre' or 'theatrical' because JNM uses neither modern theatrical conventions nor a proper stage. Adding to this, I often observed that one of the main concerns among the young college- and university-educated artists and critics has been how to develop *ranga manca* (stage theatre), particularly in 'culturally bankrupt' regions which do not have civil cultural practices (historically these are regions with lesser colonial cultural influences). Cultural leaders, actors and directors, teachers and professors from institutions like the *Sangīt Nāṭak Akādami*, the National School of Drama and the elite universities across India appear to be on a mission. The mission is, as Thiong'o sarcastically remarks, that 'the theatre is to be taken to the people', 'the people were to be given a taste of the treasures of the theatre' and 'the people had no traditions of theatre' (*Decolonising the Mind* 41). This mission has to be pursued in the light of government policies. To fulfil this mission, the state institutions, NGOs and corporate bodies are running theatre awareness and training programmes.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Recently all big corporate giants like Tata, Mahindra and Vedanta, which otherwise have been displacing thousands of impoverished communities are funding theatre awareness programmes.

On the other side, the existing cultural performance traditions of the marginalized communities are getting ‘culturally bombarded’ to an extent that leads to self-doubt on the part of the community practitioners: Does their performance have any worth at all? These examples expose the situation in which theatre and performance in India is largely viewed in the languages of representation and in the idioms of the stage. Not only the practitioners (who may not be aware about the critical discourses of theatre and performance studies) but also the works of major scholars of this field consciously or unconsciously carry such an elitist approach. I argue that in most cases, the methodological approaches to the study of such performances are contained, with some exceptions, within the same colonialist and elitist framework from which they claim to break away. This kind of elitism, as pointed out by Thiong’o, is often ‘a function of [the critics’] colonially and neo-colonially induced alienation from the labouring class of their own society’ (Cantalupo *The World of Thiong’o* 14).

Theatre and performance as forms of social practice is supposed to help in ‘framing, organizing and presenting alternative stories’ (Bhatia *Acts of Resistance* 3). However, even the ‘multiple’, ‘diverse’ and ‘alternative’ discourses on Indian theatre and performance remained largely middle-class, urban-centric and elitist in nature. Now, it becomes imperative to study this field by ‘interrogating and setting aside Eurocentricism and cultural elitism’ (Savran 211). One of the major reasons for this neglect, I suggested, is the absence of an appropriate conceptual framework to deal with such popular folk performances, which do not follow the conventions of an elitist and western model of performance. This absence of an alternative conceptual framework to study popular cultural performances of the lower orders and labouring classes renders the discipline from the colonialist historiography to the subaltern studies. Otherwise, there is no reason why artists like Gaddar, Vimala or Tijan Bai or the community performances do not have due attention like their contemporaries. Even in progressive writings, middle-class theatre

practitioners like Safdar Hashmi, Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar have been given scholarly attention, but not their non-middle class counterparts (for example, Nazar, Gaddar, Sandhya) who are also engaged in similar progressive and revolutionary cultural practices. What is the basis of this aesthetic taste? Why is one mystified while the other is camouflaged? The fundamental conceptual problem I have raised in this thesis is that one cannot read the performances of cultural labour, which commonly belong to a culture of lower-orders through middle-class perspectives, which inherently carry colonial and upper-caste-class cultural values. This would relegate such performances to a cultural wasteland. One needs to use a perspective and conceptual framework that at least recognizes the fundamental contradictions of that culture. For instance, jokes, satire and obscenity constitute some important segments of the performances of cultural labour, but viewed from a middle-class 'civic' perspective, they are assumed to be corrupting and reflect lowbrow tastes. This thesis is not the first that claims to study Indian folk performance as such. Although marginal and neglected in comparison to the analysis of Sanskrit and modern Indian theatre, there are wide-ranging studies on Indian folk performance—from folklore to folk drama and folk theatre. While folkloric studies have their own ethnocentric problems, the other scholarship largely emerging from the discipline of historical studies primarily deals with how folk performances are represented or used by the colonialists, nationalists, progressives and how they should be used now. In this thesis, I have explored some of these questions in the connections of what I call the performances of cultural labour, which stand for non-elite, non-middle class, non-institutionalized genres of performances grounded in cultural labour and lived experiences of labouring communities.

When Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) announced that the 'industrial labour' lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged as the 'immaterial labour' (labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity), then they had post-

modernist and post-capitalist society in mind. According to them, the dissolution of traditional social bodies and the dissolvent of manual labour characterize the post-capitalist society. However, the question is what has happened to labour in other societies that have remained 'pre-industrial' and 'traditional' with a pervasive culture of caste-based manual labour. This labour concern has been so absent from the present cultural analysis that 'a culturalist turn appears as if inevitable and natural' (Rege 1038). My focus in this thesis is precisely to explicate the cultural labour factor that is integral to the politics and aesthetics of such performances. By explicating cultural labour, this thesis attempts to bring manual labour and its subjectivity, proximity and 'universal' connections along with the aesthetic discourse related to labouring bodies in the field of theatre, performance, and cultural studies.¹²⁸

Culturalist discourses tend to erase the labouring aspect of bodies to favour libidinal bodies. Schilling has rightly pointed out that bodies' studies have tended to neglect the subject of the wage labour in favour of consumption and culture (Schilling 73). While the libidinal bodies are in, labouring bodies are out. This absence is not a mere thematic oversight. It also reflects the postmodernist shift in interest from their lived experiences to their textual renderings: there is preoccupation with 'individuation,' identity and subjectivity, though largely detached from historical context and social structure. The result is, a 'fantastic level of abstraction without delivering a concrete, situated, and materialist understanding of the body' (Moi 31). As Austin and Butler's notion of performativity has become a preferred choice in performance studies, there is a clear evasion of 'history,' 'social' and 'capital' in the discourses of performance studies. The discourse of performance studies is facing the persistent dilution of material and labour. The performance of cultural labour as a conceptual framework by giving

¹²⁸ When I say 'universal connection,' I mean to say the universal connections of capital and labour prompted by capital. For this matter, I would like to quote Chibber who argues that people draw on local cultures and practices when they resist capitalism, or when they resist various agents of capital. At the same time they may also carry universal aspirations or universal interests (2013).

emphasis on material and manual labour in performance attempts to reclaim the body, which is a site of material production and labour consumption. I have explored in this study how labouring bodies create a new corporeality by incorporating labour and materiality. Labouring bodies in performance is not only a theoretical proclivity but also a theatrical and performative mode of articulation, which attributes to a new kind of aesthetic and for that matter new analysis for its understanding. The body and social life, as Simon de Beauvoir (1989) argued are invariably implicated and intertwined; therefore, the performance based on daily lives cannot be seen in isolation. In this thesis, I argue that not only the dominant discourse but also the counter-discourse and counter-narrative focused on Indian theatre and performance studies moves around the same class and the same methodological framework. In these dominant frameworks not only are the questions of caste, labour and language neglected but questions about morality, secularism and gender are approached in a limited way. The performance of cultural labour is a small step towards addressing that gap in scholarship. The performance of cultural labour is a conceptualization of folk performance that goes against what Bharucha terms the cooption of rural performances within the predominantly urban genre of 'folk theatre' (*Theatre and the World*).

When scholars like Moffat (1979) and Dumont (1980) argue that the lower castes do not have their own culture and instead replicate the dominant social order, it appears that they are viewing the lower-caste cultures from the dominant upper-caste viewpoint. The labouring body is central to what I define as the performance of cultural labour. Placing labouring bodies at the centre, I have used the performance of cultural labour as a conceptual framework for understanding Indian folk performance. Labouring bodies, which are the central to the performance of cultural labour, produce a distinctive mode of performance and aesthetic and therefore I argue that such performance traditions need a new approach in our study. The performance of cultural labour in its corporeality

incorporates lived experiences, labour and the language of materiality in its primary consideration. Based on four folk performances—*Bhūmi-pūjā* (a land worship celebration), contemporary *Bideśiāor Lauṇḍā-nāc*, *Reśamā-Cuharmala* and the performances of *Gaddar* and *Jana Nāṭya Maṇḍalī*—I have analysed some of the defining characteristics: landscape, materiality, identity, genre and labouring of the performance of cultural labour. While I have used a performance studies approach to look into the matter, the approach itself has drawn from the performativity of the matter, that is, from the performance of landscape and the materiality of Indian folk performances from below. Cultures are most fully expressed and realized in rituals and theatrical performances. One can observe the significant ‘role of performance in the production of culture in its widest sense’ (Reinelt and Roach *Critical Theories* 5). Hence, performance as an embodiment of cultures comes to the fore. One of the major problems of the conceptualization of such performances has been the core emphasis on the event-centric study of performances. I have tried to go beyond event in my analysis. This is because some meanings in a performance may not have their proper place in an event, although they belong to it. Therefore, we need to find out some missing links even outside the event. The thesis shows how much significance can be left out and how some of the epistemic meaning can be easily misinterpreted if we only understand performance in context of an event.

Theatre scholars like S. Chatterjee (2008), Bishnupriya Dutt (2008) and others have discussed the marginalization of mythological themes in colonial, postcolonial and contemporary periods. However, in many parts of India with the assertion of Dalits, Adivasis and labouring castes along with their local identity and politics, mythological themes have returned not in the mythical forms of the past but in the domains of contemporary democratic politics and cultures. The politicization of caste and labour questions through myths and legends led to the resurgence of such performances across India. Popular folk performances have emerged as major sites of contestation (Bihar,

Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh can be seen as examples). Scholars have also argued about the way myths have been used by the nationalist and right wing forces to forward their hegemonic nationalist agendas. But the myths and narratives which were once used by the 'imagined communities' to construct the ideal nation have also been used by the oppressed and experienced communities to fight for their rights and construct their own ideas of nation as based on historical denials, injustices, violence and vulnerability. This thesis has discussed the performance of cultural labour as the performance of denials, injustices, violence and resistance.

When I started this project, I had the feeling that most of these folk performances were disappearing. The feeling was not entirely wrong in view of the cultural homogenization that globalization has intensified and led to the disappearance of several mnemonic cultures from their communities. It needs to be acknowledged that several folk performances have disappeared and the broader provenance of folk culture seems to be diminishing, not only because some practices have not changed themselves sufficiently to adapt to the times but also because they have lost their grounds of existence because of local changes to relations of production. At this moment, when I am close to finishing this project, I can see that some of these mnemonic performances are making their comeback. *Bhūmi-pūjā*, *Bideśiā* and *Reśamā-Cuharmala* all have recently made strong comebacks. Some of them have undergone a considerable change. Broadly, I have two hopes for this thesis: methodological intervention in Indian theatre and performance studies in particular and performance studies in general and an alternative historiography of some of the popular performance traditions labelled as folk culture. I end this thesis with a hope that the performance of cultural labour as a conceptual framework may change some of the ways in which we tend to see popular and regional cultural traditions.

PHOTO ESSAY



Figure 2.1: *Bhagait and Manariyās in Bhūmi-Pūjā*



Figure 2.2: Collection of *Mānars* (Drums) for the celebration. A *mānar* is used for ritual purposes.



Figure 2.3: *Gahabar* (Worshipping Place), a social and material projection of ancestor's heritage.



Figure 2.4: *Bhūmi-pūjā* procession passing through a village and going towards the river Ganges.



Figure 3.1: Legendary Bhikhari Thakur and his *Bidesiyā*, the famous play was performed as well as widely circulated as printed booklets.



Figure 3.2: Brahmddev Rai Bidesiyā party is performing at Ganjpar village, Athmalgola.



Figure 3.3: A makeshift greenroom for *Bidesiyā* artists. Artists walk from this green room to stage.



Figure 3.4: ‘We have right to sleep and walk out if performance is boring or we are tired’. Children are sleeping around 3:00 PM.



Figure 3.5: A female impersonator after performing woman is performing male role.



Figure 3.6: An Interview session with Padarth Rai *Bidesiyā* artists.



Figure 4.1: A beautified image of Chuhamal. Chuhamal can be seen as a special devotee of Devi Durga.



Figure 4.2: Chuhamal is playing as *Kodhia* in a recorded play of Reshma-Chuhamal. Source: Supreme Video.



Figure 5.1: Subbarao Panigrahi and Cherabandaraju whose works paved the way for JNM. Source: Banned Thought. <http://www.bannedthought.net/India/>



Figure 5.2: Gaddar and the JNM are performing at a rally in Hyderabad in 2004. Banned Thought



Figure 5.3: JNM artists are performing in an undisclosed location. On the other side JNM Kumari in action. Source: Banned Thought



Figure 5.4: Gaddar, Vagapanda Prasad Rao and other JNM artists are performing among the crowds of 200000 in 1990 in Hyderabad. Source: Unnamed Video



Figure 5.5: Pictures of performance hanging at Sandhya's residence.



Figure 5.6: A wall poster for performance at Osmania University, Hyderabad, Year-2011.



Figure 5.7: JNM artists are walking towards a venue to perform. Source: Banned Thought.



Figure 5.8: JNM artists in action in an undisclosed location. Source: Banned Thought.

APPENDIX

BIHARI AND TELUGU SONG TEXTS

Chapter I

[1]

Sagro umar ham, nācahun mein bitayālī
Corī ke laiyakā bhaīla, wohu sār mar gaīla
Pānc bighā dhān rahe, wohu dhān dah gaīla
Mattī ke ghar rhe, wohu ghar bah gaīla
Ghar mein puraniyā rhe, wohu sab mar gaīla
Par śarm-lihāj bec ke, nācat ham rahlī
sagro umar ham [...]

Chapter II

[1]

Haa...Haaa... Haaaaaaaa... Haaaaaaaa
Sumiran karahun is mattī ke ā maiyā dharatiyā ke
Jehi hankhin hamar palanhār ho... Haaaaaaaa

[2]

Kie caḍhabun dhartī maiyī ke...aaaaahaaaa
Kaise manaun Dīhvar ke ho... aaaaaahaaaa

[3]

Ghar-ghar mein śamsān ghāt hai
Ghar-ghar mein phansā ghar hai
Ghar-ghar mein diwāren hain
Diwāron se ṭakraḱar girti hai wah

[4]

Gussa mein bolalan Chaṭhi maiyā –
Sunahun ho Mahā Dev

[5]

Itnā ham janatio ho devtā hoba tu nirmohia ho
Jayat khojat hun hote dosar darbār

[6]

Aho Rāmā! Suarā Ganga-jal bhaṭṭhaīlan ho na
Aho Rāmā! Chamran bhagat ho gaīlan ho Rāmā

Chapter III

[1]

Bhāve nahin more bhavanmā ho Rāmā
Videś (bideś) gavanamā

[2]

Sāīan aaī holī diwalī, Le ahiyo chundarī/bindia lālī
Nā lahiyo to nā lahiyo sajjan, Rajdhānī pakara ke ā jahiyo

[3]

Railiya nā bairī se jahījabā nā bairī se paisabā bairā na
Mor sāīyan ke bilmābe se paisbā bairī nā

[4]

Adhī-adhī ratiyī ke bole koyaliyā
Cihunkī uṭhī goriyā sejariyā se ṭhar

[5]

Not available

[6]

Rupiyā ginayī lehlā paghā dharaī dihlā
Ceriā ke cheriā banabla ho babuji

[7]

Maiyā lāle rangba na
Lāle rang sindurā ho
Lale rang chundariyā
Ho Lale rangwa na

[8]

Muhnmā par dalike cadāria
Lahariyā loota e raja

[9]

Dil ke darbājā par kauno rāj kar jāī
Tohar phulal phulal phulauna
Kahiyo āwāz kar jāī

[10]

*Ham to inquilab hain, har zulm ka jawab hain
 Har garib, mazdoor shahid ka ham hi to murad hain
 Uthe chalo, badhe chalo, ham to inquilab hain
 Jhagra ab chhoro yeh Hindu Mussalman ki
 Aaj ki zarurat hai insan ko insan ki [...]
 Vande Mataram, Bharat Mata ki jay
 Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan![slogans]*

Chapter IV

[1]

*Kie tohrā holo he Reshma
 Kahe Ceriā veś banāblu na he na [...]
 Kāhe agnā ghar bahāralu he na*

[2]

*Sutal me rahli he bhaujī
 He lālī sej palangiā par he na
 Ahe sapna he dekhli he na
 He bhaujī, bhārī ajugutbā he sapnā je dekhli he na*

[3]

*Kahamā mein bajay hey bhaujī
 He Joṛī, jhāl miridangbā he na
 He kahama mein bajaiy he na
 He mohinī bhalā bansuriā he
 Kahaban mein bajaiya he na
 He kaune bajabe na
 mohini bhala basuria he
 kaune bajabe he na*

[4]

*Bābu tohrā mārto he Reshma
 Bhaiyā Ajabi Singh na he na
 He marī ke khaliyā mein na
 He bhusbā bhar detav he na
 Marī ke khaliyī mein na he na*

[5]

Ghar ke paschimmā he Reshma
He Anjani bhalā shahariya he na
Utahin he bājay he na
He Reshma Jodi, jhal Mridangbā he
Utahin he bājay he na

[6]

Sun ke hansto he Reshma
Nagari-gāon ke logbā he na
He hansī-hansī mārto he na
Yehi tore jāt samjbā he
Hansī-hansī marto he na

[7]

Nahin mora gharba panbharnī
Nahin mora dwarbā he na
Nahin re bate na, panbharni
Ptā mātā-pitāji ke nāmamā he na

[8]

Gharbā paraiya he panbharnī
Anjanī bhalī shahariyā he na
Ahe pitāji ke nāmamā na
He panbharnī Bihari Lal khalifwa
Hai pitāji ke nāmamā na

[9]

Tohre kāraṇmā ho surmā
Bābu bhaiyā tejli na ho na
Tohre karaṇma na ho surmā
Tejli kul-parivār ho karaṇma na

[10]

Tohre se karbau ho surma
Aaj to vivahba ho na
Bharla jawaniya ho surma
Matti me milayla ho na
Ho surma tohre se karbo na

[11]

*Pahna pahna pahina surma
piyrī rangal dhotiyā ho na
Ho auro ho panhte na ho na
surma aām ke kangnmā ho na
Hamhun te pahanbai swāmijī
Aaje chulhan sariya ho na*

[12]

*Tohre achait ho bhaiyā
Surma kayalkai bezzatiyā ho
Sārī morā pharlakai bhaiyā
Coliyā maskailak ho na
Ho bhaiyā looti ho lelkai na
Bhaiya hamro bhala izzatiyā ho
Lūtī ho lelkai ho na*

[13]

*Abhī se kara ho surmā
Hamro se premamā ho na
Abhi se kara ho na
Hamro se viyahbā ho na*

Chapter V

[1]

*āgadu āgadu āgadu
Ee ākalī poru āgadu
Ee dopidi palana anthem vāraku
Ee sāyudhā poru āgadu*

[2]

*Lāl Salām lāl salām
Bhūmī koraku bhukti koraku
Mana deśā vimukti koraku
Vidayarthī vīrulārā vārulārā sūnalārā
Kotaladi śram jeevalu andukondī lāl salām*

[3]

Vandanālu vandanālammo mā biddalu

Vandanālu vandanālammo, mā kunalu
Virulārā śūrulārā radicallā durulārā
Radicallā śūrulārā Raytukūlī biddalārā

[4]

E ūru nīdirā, e party nīdirā
E dālam nīdirā, sūtīgā ceppā kunte
Sūtu cestāmurā [...]

[5]

Nindu amāsu nādu O Lacāgumadi
āda pidā puttinnatho O Lacāgummadi

[6]

Apuro rickshaw [Not available]

[7]

Bhārāta apnī mahāna bhūmi
Iskī kahānī suno re bhai
Sujlām suphalām isī deś me
Rotī mahengā kyon re bhai

[8]

Ammā Telengana
Akali kekalā ganammā

[9]

America se hame dete hain jhaṭkā
Ayodhya mein hamne khāyā hai paṭka
Rath Ram kā sajāyā bhai
Game deś kā bajāyā bhai
Kaise Swayamsevak hai bhai
Sevā swayam kī chalā hai bhai
Dhandhā rastravād kā bhai
Candā dollar mein lete hain bhai

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